Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
10

Ichiro Sakaki

Illustration Yuugen

Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

10

Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE 10

Ichiro Sakaki Illustration Yuugen

Contents

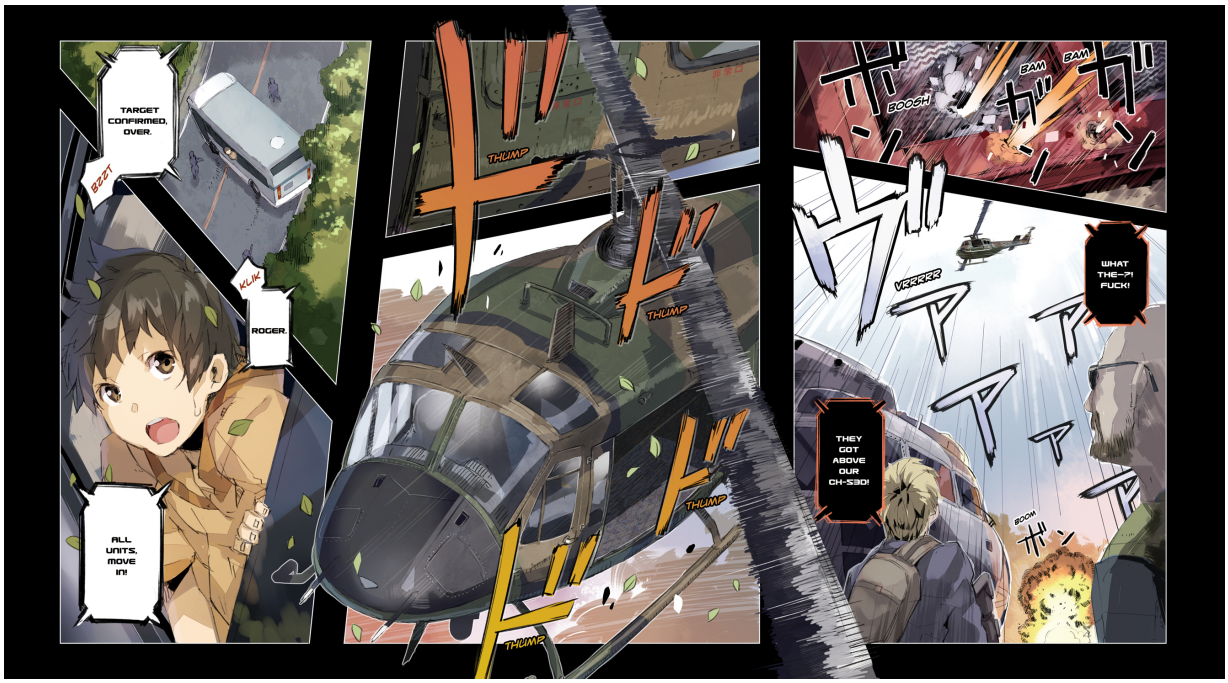
Chapter One: This Just In: We're Under Attack!

Chapter Two: Operation Rescue Minori-san

Chapter Three: The Going Is Easy, but the Coming Home...

Yuugen Character Designs

Afterword


TARGET CONFIRMED, OVER.
BZZT
KLIK
ROGER.
ALL UNITS, MOVE IN!
THUMP
THUMP
THUMP
THUMP
BOOSH
BAM
BAM
VERRRR
WHAT THE--?! FUCK!
THEY GOT ABOVE OUR CH-53D!
BOOM

Shinichi's Eldant Bodyguard No. 1
Myusel Fourant
Shinichi's JSDF Bodyguard (but currently captured)
Koganuma Minori
General Manager of Amutech
Kanou Shinichi
Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire
Petralka an Eldant III
Shinichi's Eldant Bodyguard No. 2
Elvia Harneiman

Chapter One: This Just In: We're Under Attack!

It was dark inside the building.

The place hadn't been cleaned in months, or maybe years. The windows were so dirty, it was hard to see outside, nothing but dim light seeping through. Somewhere in the gloom it was possible to make out some old metal drums and piles of wood. The chains and crane hooks hanging from the ceiling were rusty, and there wasn't so much as an emergency light anywhere to be seen.

All of this, along with the layer of dust coating everything, suggested how long it had been since this building had been used.

And in the middle of it all was a woman. A female officer of the Japan Self-Defense Force: Koganuma Minori.

A woman, yes, but one highly accomplished in the martial arts. Her glasses may have given people a gentle first impression, and she usually acted reserved and calm. But when the moment called for it, she could draw on the fighting skills her father had taught her—or simply draw the pistol she always carried. She was a bracing sight either way.

The fact that she was involved in a highly confidential special operation spoke to the fact that she was more than just a foot soldier who knew how to beat people up. She was quick-witted and resourceful.

But now... Now...

"...Hrgh..."

At this moment, she couldn't put any of her copious skills to use. The reason was simple: her wrists were bound by one of those chains hanging from the ceiling. Her toes—her shoes had been stripped off—didn't quite graze the floor. Psychologically speaking, it was a more disconcerting place to be than hanging high in the air.

Minori's hair, usually tied up in a bun, now hung messily at her shoulders. Her glasses still sat on her face, one of the lenses clearly cracked;

they hadn't been taken away, but looked like they might fall off at any moment. The state of her clothes, too, spoke to the violence with which she'd been treated. On top, she'd been stripped down to her underclothes, clearly revealing the cleft of her generous chest. And while she still had her skirt, her stockings were badly torn. There was a certain kind of person who might have been overjoyed to be in her position—but not her.

"Ugh..." She groaned softly and shifted. She was trying to get out of her bindings somehow. There are stories about people who have learned to dislocate their own joints in order to escape handcuffs and ropes. Minori might even have known some of those techniques. But...

"Ah, you're awake."

The door opened, and several silhouettes entered. The question was posed to her in Japanese, but when the speaker got close enough to see through the grimy darkness, he was clearly not from her country. He was white, as were all the sharp-featured faces around him.

Russians, perhaps? The faces looked meticulous, yet imposing, wide cheeks accompanied by strangely cold eyes. It was hard to imagine them smiling. The wrinkles lining their foreheads and creeping in next to their eyes suggested they were not young men.

Minori-san looked up in shock.

That face had to be one of the best known in the entire world.

"Pu**n...!"

Vladimir Vladimirovich Pu**n. The fourth and current President of Russia.

But there was something else, something even more shocking.

"That's impossible!"

All of the men standing in front of her were Pu**n.

He was the strongest president—probably literally, being a former KGB agent, judo champion, and experienced sambo practitioner who had allegedly survived five separate assassination attempts. In other words, he was the one who put the *scare* in Red Scare.

This man would be despair-inducing enough by himself, but now Minori-san was faced with a crowd of him.

"And now it is time for you to talk, young lady of Japan," Pu**n No. 1 (let's call him) said, coming closer. Minori-san spared him a single glance... then scowled hatefully and looked away. She wasn't going to say a word, she seemed to be telling him.

The corners of Pu**n No. 1's mouth turned up just a little at this display of defiance. He seemed to expect the reaction. He turned to the Pu**ns (that's the plural form) behind him and said, "Bring it in."

"Yes, sir," one of the Pu**ns (plural form again) said—then he ushered a large container on a self-propelled platform over toward Minori-san. A second later, one of the sides fell free, revealing what was within.

Minori-san caught her breath: inside the container was a cage. It had dozens of thick bars; it was obviously intended to hold a huge, powerful animal.

And there was, in fact, a large creature inside it.

Fangs bared, drooling, eyes alight with madness—a lion!

No, not a lion. Not a tiger, either. Or a wolf, or crocodile, or a snake.

Inside was a polar bear.

What was it doing there? Was it just... because this was Russia she was dealing with?

Then Pu**n No. 1 said something unbelievable: "This bear knows the taste of human flesh. You might survive an arm or a leg, but if he gets to your torso, well, you won't last long. I advise you to speak before he does so."

Minori-san was silent. She stared at the white animal in the cage, never looking away.

After a long moment, Pu**n No. 1 said, "I see how it is."

Then Pu**n No. 2 (not that you could really tell them apart, but let's just say) opened the door of the cage.

Two massive, white legs came out. The animal must have been at least two meters long—maybe even three. Covered in fur and muscle, made its

way patiently toward Minori-san, who was in no position to run away.

Minori-san, still silent, stared the creature down. Her eyes were practically piercing...

"Hrm?" Suddenly, in front of the shocked Pu**ns (all of them), the bear made a sharp right, hunched over, and rode away on a bicycle that it seemed to pull out of thin air.

It was kind of cute, actually.

Now the Pu**ns (plural) looked at each other.

"Maybe we shouldn't have borrowed him from the Bol**oi Circus?"

"What were we supposed to do? We didn't have the budget to train our own."

Apparently even the Pu**ns (none of them) had been expecting Minori-san to be able to win a staring contest with a polar bear. They might not have been so surprised if they knew she had gone toe-to-claw with a dragon once. A domesticated circus animal was really no threat. Apparently the thing about human flesh had been a bluff.

"She leaves us no choice," Pu**n No. 1 said. "Call them in."

"Yes, sir," another of the Pu**ns—Pu**n No. 3—said. He nodded and left the room.

A short time later, though, he came back and nodded to Pu**n No. 1.

"Behold, young lady," Pu**n No. 1 said, indicating something with a jerk of his chin.

Minori-san, despite her desire not to look in his direction, couldn't ignore his portentous tone. She spared the slightest of glances—

—and her breath caught in her throat.

There were two more silhouettes at the entrance now. Both men, she guessed. The light behind them obscured their features, but their outlines were suggestive enough.

"Hrk...!" Minori-san, who hadn't been intimidated even by a live polar bear, made a small, strained noise.

"You are free to pretend indifference, but I doubt your little act will last long with these two. I will be watching to see for myself exactly how long."

The Pu**ns (all of them), all wearing the exact same half-smile, backed away from Minori-san. The newcomers stepped forward in their place.

They were not Pu**ns.

One was a young man with golden hair. The other was a middle-aged

man with black hair. Both were wearing plain overalls, but the complete lack of any sort of stain, mark, or discoloration revealed that these weren't their everyday work outfits.

"We already know your weakness," Pu**n No. 1 said from over by the wall. "Just look. Are they not identical?"

Minori-san didn't say a word.

"Do it. Hold nothing back."

The golden-haired young man and the dark-haired middle-aged man began to unzip their overalls, from their collars down toward their crotches. Underneath, they appeared to be completely naked. Nothing but unblemished skin and toned muscle appeared from under those clothes...

Still Minori-san said nothing. The two men were expressionless except for a slight flush of excitement on their faces. What could the two of them be planning to do with the bound, half-naked young woman hanging before them? The mind went to many places, none of them good.

Minori-san resolutely tried to look away, but Pu**n No. 3 (probably—it was hard to tell) came around behind her, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look at the men.

"Ohh..." Minori-san trembled. She couldn't suppress an instinctive response to what was obviously about to happen.

And then...

Then the golden-haired young man reached out and grabbed...

...the dark-haired older man, slowly drawing him closer.

"No...!" Minori-san groaned. "Don't do that... Handling him as gently as a broken dream...!"

Her breath got hotter. She wanted to look away, but Pu**n No. 3 made sure she couldn't. Surely she should just close her eyes—but behind the glasses, her eyes were so wide that it was obvious she didn't even want to blink.

The two men pressed against each other, but then they stopped. They simply stood there, looking at each other.

"Those passionate gazes..." Minori-san breathed. "What *could* they be wishing for, with such melancholy in their eyes...!"

"I suggest you start talking," Pu**n No. 1 said, "or things are going to escalate."

"This... This is unconscionable," Minori-san said, writhing where she

hung from the chain. But of course, she found no sympathy from the Pu**ns (any of them).

Instead, one of them said, “We are aware that you’ve been buying *Cat & Bunny* doujinshi. The especially *yaoi* ones.”

They suddenly produced a small book—specifically, a doujinshi aimed at ladies eighteen and up. Minori-san couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“You seem to particularly enjoy seeing the main characters in each other’s arms. We have, of course, properly investigated which is the top and which is the bottom. And we are all too cognizant of the fact that you cannot abide role reversals. So tell us everything you know, or things are only going to get steamier from here.”

“This is a... a crime against humanity!” Minori-san all but howled.

What an astonishing twist! The Russian agents had discovered just how rotten Koganuma Minori was, and now they were exploiting her weakness to the full. It was real-life BL, right there in front of her eyes—but it was the opposite of what she wanted to see, with the top and bottom reversed, staring into each other’s eyes. Could there be a worse fate for a fujoshi?

She had never imagined such tortures could exist in this world.

Wait—was it torture? Or was it heaven?

Role reversal had been known to destroy fujoshi groups before, though...

“They’re practically nose-to-nose... Erg! No! You can’t touch him there... Ah, ahhh, nooooeeees!” Her voice cracked sweetly, her eyes brimming and her face drawn. The sound of her voice alone could have warranted an X rating.

“Now,” Pu**n No. 3 said. His tone was soft, almost sweet, like Mephistopheles negotiating with Faust. “Tell us, Minori Koganuma...”

“Ahhh...” Her pitiful cry echoed through the building.

And then...

.....

.....

“Master...?”

Myusel’s voice suddenly brought me back to the real world.

“Huh...?” I looked up to see Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia sitting around the table, and all looking very worried.

“Are you okay?” the flaxen-haired Myusel asked, touching me.

Myusel Fourant—my personal maid, if you can believe it. Her sweet,

beautiful face was presently darkened with concern. She had always been the meek type—and watching her blink as she gazed at me with her big, violet eyes, I could practically feel how generous and kind she was.

But then, so were the other faces around me.

"We have been calling you, but you did not answer," Petralka said with a frown. She, too, had a hand on me.

Petralka an Eldant III. At first glance she looked cute, almost like a doll, but she was actually the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, a country in an entirely separate world.

And she shouldn't have been here. Yes, she was the one who had decided to sneak along—but if there was anyone we had to worry about here in Japan, it would be her.

"Are y' feeling tired? Or maybe sick?" This question came from the third girl—yes, also touching me—Elvia. Specifically, Elvia Harneiman.

She was a beast-girl artist from the other world. She had actual ears and an actual tail—in short, an otaku dream girl.

And she had the same sort of anxious look as the other two. She was always pretty easygoing—you could almost say mellow—so she looked like the calmest of the three, but I could see her tail flicking nervously from side to side.

"Oh... Sorry, I just..." I must have slipped off to sleep, even though I hadn't remotely noticed it happening.

Let's just say it had been a busy afternoon. I must have been running on adrenaline and not noticed how exhausted I was. Then again, Myusel and the others had been through just as much as I had, and they were all still awake, so maybe it just went to show what a weakling I was. How embarrassing. Apparently I still had all the physical strength of a former shut-in.

Anyway...

"I just... got a little drowsy..." I looked around my nice, familiar house.

That's right: I was in Japan. Not the other world.

But Myusel, Elvia, and Petralka were all here. Everything that had happened since we'd arrived in Japan flashed through my mind: the reunion with my family. The yakiniku we'd all shared. Going back to Akihabara.

And then there was being cornered by a Chinese (?) spy, kidnapped by the US Army, and losing Minori-san to Russian (?) agents.

Minori-san...

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Myusel said when she saw me frown silently. “We shouldn’t have woken you up when you were resting...”

“No, no, no,” I said, shaking my head. She must have thought I was angry. “I shouldn’t have been asleep anyway. And besides, I appreciate you woke me up when you did. I was having a nightmare.”

“Like a bad dream?” Elvia asked. “What kind?”

“Well, uh...”

I could still hear Minori-san’s erotic groan in my imagination. I unconsciously squeezed my knees together.

The others looked at me, puzzled.

“Anyway, uh, like I said, this is no time to be sleeping. Sorry about that.” And it wasn’t the time to be having weird dreams, either. “Let’s get back to what we’re going to do next.”

My name is Kanou Shinichi.

I’m pretty much your average otaku—I love anime, manga, light novels, whatever.

If there’s anything that’s unusual about me, it’s not me personally so much as my environment.

I don’t live in Japan.

In fact, I don’t live on *Earth*.

The place I live is technically contiguous with Japan, but it’s a completely different world—you have to pass through a hyperspace tunnel called “the hole” to get there.

It’s a long story, but suffice it to say I’m the General Manager of Amutech, the first general entertainment company in the Holy Eldant Empire, a nation in that other world. My job is to spread otaku culture in a place that’s basically a full-throttle fantasy world, with magic and dragons and all kinds of things.

I was lost at first—very lost—but over time I’ve ended up surrounded by people who help me have a fulfilling life. My maid and caretaker, Myusel; the empress of the whole place, Petralka; my bodyguard and WAC Minori-san; a self-proclaimed wandering artist, Elvia; and so many others.

But then one day, I heard that my dad, a light-novel author, was in the hospital. I can’t say I had ever been very homesick, and I found my life in Eldant plenty rewarding, but there was no way I could ignore a family crisis like that. So I asked the Japanese government to let me go home for a while, and they agreed.

In my case, though, there was no way it could be that simple. My intentions for the spread of otaku culture hadn't always lined up with the government's, and they had even sent a special-forces squad to assassinate me once. A change in the Japanese government and the protection of the local leadership had saved me from being killed outright, but I was definitely on Japan's list of people who didn't toe the line.

You could say I didn't entirely trust them.

So when I came back to Japan, it wasn't just Minori-san who came with me. Myusel and Elvia went along as my bodyguards, too.

Actually getting back didn't prove to be any problem, anyway. Yes, it turned out Petralka had stowed away... but still, no serious issues all the way back to my house.

My dad, I learned, was actually in pretty good shape—in fact, he was downright energetic, and I probably didn't need to have worried. But I did finally get a reunion with him, my mom, and my thoroughly disenchanted little sister. I couldn't tell them the whole truth about everything that happened—state secrets and all—but I was able to bring them up to speed on roughly what was going on. Apparently I had disappeared without so much as a note, and my sister even thought maybe it had been her fault.

So I took care of my nominal reason for coming home within the first afternoon, leaving me plenty of time to take Myusel and the others to Akihabara. Minori-san and I hadn't been there in ages, and Myusel and company had never been there at all, so I was really looking forward to it.

Buuuut...

I never noticed the shadows closing in on us as we hobnobbed around Akihabara.

First the Chinese (probably, I think) spies. They pretended to be employees at a maid café in order to kidnap me, but it didn't work.

The next attack came from the Russians (apparently). Incredibly, they succeeded in abducting my bodyguard Minori-san.

The rest of us, though, were approached by people from the American army who pretended to be our friends—and then tried to kidnap us.

Obviously, the rest of the world knew about us and was paying attention. They knew we could tell them something about the big secret Japan was clearly hiding.

Using every trick we had—from magic to Elvia's superhuman physical

abilities to a passing otaku's itasha—we somehow made it safely back to my house, but we still didn't have Minori-san. We didn't know what to do.

Her superior, Matoba-san, had advised us to let the Japanese government handle Minori-san while the rest of us went back to Eldant—but you might remember what I said about trusting the government.

And then...

Back in my living room.

"I wonder... if Minori-sama's all right..."

We sat around the table looking at each other. Specifically, we each had one arm stretched out on the tabletop, our hands placed on top of one another. It looked like we were about to give a cheer at a sports game, or maybe participate in some bizarre ritual—but there was a perfectly good reason for it.

Magic rings.

The quickest way to communicate with Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia, who were after all from another world, was to use magic devices that could communicate thoughts. Myusel and Petralka knew a certain amount of Japanese, but as the talk got more complicated, these translator rings saved us a lot of time.

In general, though, magical items didn't work in an environment where there was no magical energy in the atmosphere. Strictly speaking, the rings worked based on the magical energy emitted by a person's body, but without a medium to travel through, there was no way for the magic to communicate with the person you were trying to talk to. In a confined space, we could have opened a bottle of sprites and used the magical energy to talk just as if we were in the other world. But we only had so many of those bottles, and we wanted to save them when we could.

So instead we sat with our hands joined, literally communicating by touch. This would allow the rings to work even without sprites in the atmosphere.

"What if they're doing something terrible to her?" Myusel grimaced, apparently envisioning what that "something terrible" might be. She usually

looked like a sweet, smiling angel... but circumstances had made my maid look very grim indeed. It made me realize how hard she must have been working to look upbeat when she had come to cheer me up earlier.

How noble, how heroic...

"She will be all right... or so we would like to believe," said Petralka. She looked less grim than flummoxed, unable to come up with a plan to get around this deadlock. She was so pretty, even her frown was cute.

"Y-Yeah, she's gotta be, right?!" Elvia sounded a little too eager; maybe she was trying to help lighten the mood. She looked at me almost pleadingly and said, "Th-The Ja-panese guv-erment will save her! Won't they?"

I didn't answer.

"Shinichi-sama?!" Her eyes started to look like a dog's being abandoned by its owner.

I just couldn't bring myself to blithely say, "Sure, it'll be fine!" After all, I'd brought Myusel and Elvia along exactly because I *didn't* trust the Japanese government to take care of things. Like I said, I wasn't their favorite person.

I had been getting some results in Eldant, true, but there was that squad of trained killers they had sent after me. And the time they pretended not to notice when I was abducted by the neighboring kingdom of Bahairam. And the person they sent as my "assistant" whose real job was to replace me.

Of course, I was the one the government had a grudge against, not Minori-san. But as my bodyguard, Minori-san had spoken up and acted in my support more than once. Would Japan go out of its way to save her? I hated to say it, but I wasn't sure.

If there's one thing we know, it's that nation-states won't hesitate to ruthlessly sacrifice a single individual if that person is inconvenient to them. Fiction and history alike are overflowing with examples. And Minori-san was in a unique position. If what the American agent had said was true—if she was officially already dead—it had to be because that was what best served the interests of secrecy. In a word, the government could pretend she didn't exist, and no one would be the wiser.

If there was one sliver of hope, it lay in the fact that Minori-san was privy to state secrets. If she started talking, the world Japan had gone to such lengths to hide would be out in the open. The government might

rescue her just to keep their secrets safe.

Then again, it might be easier just to kill her...

My mind flashed back to the "medical exam" we'd undergone when we came over from Eldant. They had taken blood from all of us except Petralka—meaning they had stuck us all with a hypodermic needle. What if they had injected us with some slow-acting poison, or bacteria that didn't show symptoms until later? It would be like a time bomb, reaching its most deadly effectiveness only after a set amount of time. Maybe you had to take regular antidotes, or a vaccine to counteract it. That would certainly be a logical way to protect your secrets. Maybe it was a sort of insurance—even if they hadn't expected exactly what happened, it was something that would ensure we had the good grace to die if we ran off where the government couldn't get us.

"Shinichi-samaaa..." Elvia was obviously deeply distressed.

This was bad. She really wanted an answer—or maybe she could see from my face that my thoughts weren't going anywhere good. Heck, with her nose, maybe she even detected some subtle change in my smell.

"Look, I'm sorry," I said, glancing around at everyone. "Whatever else... I'm not sure I can bring myself to just go home to Eldant and leave Minori-san here."

"That is obvious enough by now," Petralka said, frowning. "You are a fool in the strangest ways, Shinichi."

"Er... Petralka?"

"Had it been Myusel or Elvia who had been kidnapped, you would be no more likely to simply shrug and go home." She sounded a little exasperated.

I was lost for words. This meant that she... she trusted me.

Gee, that made me kind of... happy.

But then Petralka said, "So tell us—what exactly do you plan to do?"

"About that," I said, looking straight at the adorable empress. "First of all, I want at least you, Petralka, to go back to Eldant."

"What?" Petralka didn't look happy to hear that.

Dang, I knew that would make her angry. But...

"We've got who knows how many countries after us. I hate to be so blunt, but you would be the biggest prize for any of them—and the biggest problem for us if you got kidnapped."

"Ahem..." Of course, Petralka knew that perfectly well.

“They could get me or Myusel, or Elvia, and it wouldn’t make that much difference to the big picture. But you, Petralka? What then?”

I was, in the end, a Japanese citizen. Myusel and Elvia both came from the other world, but they were ultimately ordinary people, too.

But Petralka was different. Completely. She was a head of state. An absolute monarch. And the way they viewed people like her in the Middle Ages wasn’t like today’s world of democracies and communist regimes and whatever else. I had no doubt that the Eldant Empire had tens, maybe hundreds, or thousands, of people who would gladly lay down their lives for their empress.

If that empress were to be captured by a foreign power, how would the Holy Eldant Empire react? If we weren’t careful—heck, even if we *were* careful—it might lead to all-out war.

“Let us worry about Minori-san, Petralka, and you—”

“No.” She stuck out her lip and looked away. Sure. This of all times was when she chose to act her age. Or younger.

“Petralka...”

“No, no, no!” She shook her head like she was throwing a tantrum. “We shall not countenance going back alone under these circumstances!”

“But listen—”

“If we are to leave, then you, Shinichi, must come with us. And so must Myusel, and Elvia—and Minori! We will accept nothing else! And what’s more...” She glanced down for an instant. “What would we say to Garius if Minori alone did not return...?”

“Huh...?” I said.

Minister Garius en Cordobal—why would she bring him up right now?

He was Petralka’s cousin, an important advisor within the Eldant Empire. He led the knights of the realm and effectively controlled most of the country’s military. Did he see Minori-san as special somehow? Wait—what? Were they, like... you know? Had I just never noticed? I mean, I knew she lent him a lot of books, but—

“How could we tell him that his precious sister in yaoi, the one who knew his heart, was gone?”

“Oh. That.”

In addition to being a minister, Garius was also, uh—you know. He was a guy, but he liked guys, which apparently gave him something in common

with the fujoshi Minori-san. I might have expected it to be exactly the opposite—but apparently not.

"Even we have never seen Garius look so happy as when he speaks of yaoi with Minori," Petralka said.

"...Is that right?"

I suppose that's how it gets when you, you know... share an interest with someone. Even if it is an interest I think I'm going to stop talking about right now.

"Thus, we refuse to return home alone." Petralka put a hand to her modest (a word I choose for political reasons) chest, tapping it with her fist. "We shall go to rescue Minori. It is, after all, a ruler's duty to look after her subjects."

Ahh. So Petralka saw Minori-san as practically one of her own people now. That made me kind of happy, too.

This adorable empress called us her friends, without the slightest hesitation or doubt. We, who had once been part of a plot to culturally invade her country.

“It looks like we’re up against at least one army unit, though,” I said. I wasn’t sure if they had intelligence agencies or subversive operators in the Eldant Empire, so I used a broader expression. I guess it wasn’t that far off, insofar as it described people who used guns and skirted the law to support their nation behind the scenes. “Rescuing her is easy to say and all...”

“We need only use magic, needn’t we? And we have the strength of a werewolf, as well.”

“That’s right,” Myusel said as Petralka looked at her.

“Yes’m!” Elvia added as the royal gaze turned to her.

It was true that Myusel could use some magic—even I knew one spell—and that we still had a bit of leeway in our sprite supply. They weren’t very good for ranged attacks, but a rescue operation was likely to involve a lot of close-quarters fighting.

Elvia’s physical abilities, meanwhile, were something we were likely to rely on extensively. Someone who pulled a gun might have an advantage, but in hand-to-hand combat, no one could top her. And again, she would be helped by the amount of close-in battle there would probably be.

The only certainty was that it was very uncertain, but it was a start.

“But there’s the little matter of where she is...” I said.

Fighting power was no good if you didn’t know who or what to fight. And at the moment, we had no idea where Minori-san was. All we knew was that some Russian agent had abducted her in the hurly-burly of Akihabara, and to be honest, we didn’t even know if *that* was true; it was just what the Americans had told us.

“So where do we look?” I concluded.

“Hrm,” Petralka grunted. Maybe she hadn’t thought that far. “We may simply have to start searching, but we personally are not familiar enough with Ja-pan to have much confidence about what to do.”

“I’m *from* here, and even I’m lost without any clues. Hey, how would you search if we were in Eldant?”

“By magic, principally.” Petralka looked troubled. “But—”

“You need sprites or a magic stone to use magic at all in this world,” Myusel said, picking up Petralka’s thought. “But those cover such a small area that finding Minori-sama could be next to impossible...”

“Right, sure...” I said.

Even if we had a spell that could find Minori-san, it wouldn’t do us much good in Japan. The lack of magical energy to conduct the spell through the air would severely limit its range. No way we could use anything that would let us find one specific person in a large space. Could we possibly narrow down the search area even a little?

“Maybe Elvia could track her scent!” I said. “Or... maybe not.”

Elvia was shaking her head even as I spoke. “I know Minori-sama’s scent, but...”

“I know, she must have traveled by car,” I said.

And with all the people who came through Akihabara at any given time, Minori-san’s specific odor was probably long gone by now.

“Hmm,” we each muttered. It was starting to look like we were out of options. But then...

“Um, Shinichi-sama...” Myusel seemed to want to offer an opinion. “What about... you know?”

“What?”

“It was in a manga you let me read once. Something from this world that allows you to know a person’s location. Uh, the name had three characters, but they weren’t kanji, katakana, or hiragana.” She began to write in the air with her free hand.

“*Jee*... *pee*... oh! You mean GPS?”

Her face lit up. “Yes, that’s it! In the manga, it sounded like it could locate someone for you...”

“Why did you not mention such a useful thing sooner?!” Petralka demanded.

Myusel shrank back. “I—I’m sorry...”

“Er... worry not.” Petralka scratched her cheek uncomfortably and looked away.

“Well, I think it’s great that y’ remembered it.”

“Er, yes, thank you.”

“At any rate, Shinichi, could we not use this *zee pee ess*—”

“I’m sorry, but... I’m afraid we couldn’t.” Petralka looked so hopeful—

but I had to shake my head. “I had the same thought, for a moment. But if we could track her cell phone’s GPS, the government would have located her ages ago. And anyway, if a bunch of civilians thought of this, what about the people who captured her? Any trained agent would have destroyed her cell phone the second they got their hands on her.” There was a moment of silence. The others looked at each other, not quite following me. “Uh, so what I mean is—GPS is—it’s like these magic rings. If you don’t have a special tool with you, it can’t track you.”

That was pretty imprecise as explanations went, but I didn’t have time to try to tell them about how man-made satellites communicated with base stations on Earth to triangulate a position.

“Anyway,” I said, “tracking someone by GPS isn’t normally something a private individual can—well, okay, so my mom traced what I was doing once using a GPS log.”

My mom had been an ero-game designer, drawing X-rated pictures of beautiful women. Sort of as part of this vocation, during her student days she had picked up some coding skills, and used them to pitch in when her perennially shorthanded studios needed a programmer.

She acquired a bit of a talent for hacking, too. I don’t mean the “super-hacker” stuff you see in manga or whatever, where someone breaks into a military facility’s network to launch ICBMs. Come to think of it, I’ll bet nukes aren’t even connected to the network. But never mind.

“Shinichi, your mother is capable of using this ZPS?”

“Maybe, but again, if Minori-san doesn’t have a special tool with her, we won’t be able to find her. The only thing you can track is the location of the tool, not Minori-san herself.”

The four of us were looking dejectedly at each other when—

— ♪

My cell phone jingled from my pocket. The sound was the theme song from the *Rental☆Madoka* movie, meaning this wasn’t a mail or a Twitter notification—someone was calling me.

I glanced down at the screen to find Matoba-san’s name.

“It’s from Matoba-san,” I told the others, and then I answered and put the phone to my ear.

Maybe he had new info about Minori-san. Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia all had the same idea; they watched me with bated breath. But the voice we heard from my phone was... ragged.

“Shinichi-kun, are you at your house?!”

I had never heard him sound like this before. For that matter, I had hardly known him to get upset before.

“Huh? Y-Yeah, so?”

What was going on?

“All right... Shinichi-kun, stay calm and listen to me.”

“Okay...”

I felt my back stiffen. I didn’t trust Matoba-san completely, but I didn’t think he’d try to lead us into a trap, either. And that meant...

“The regular check-ins from the Public Security division assigned to your house have stopped.”

“Huh? You mean—”

“Most likely, someone or something neutralized them and is very close to your house right now. Be on the alert.”

“.....Wait...”

What the heck?!

How was I supposed to be on the alert? What for?!

But Matoba-san hung up before I could ask. Silently, I took the phone away from my ear, staring at the words *Call ended* on the screen.

“Shinichi?”

“Master?”

The look on my face obviously didn’t inspire confidence in my friends. Elvia was leaning forward too, waiting for me to say something.

All I could manage was: “What are we gonna do?”

It was the deep of the night—sometime after 3 a.m. Normally, I would have been asleep by now.

Dark shapes approached the Kanou household, careful to slip through the shadows left by the city lights.

That’s right: *shapes*. Not just one. Eight all together.

They were all men. They looked Asian—you could be forgiven for thinking they were Japanese, but as a Japanese myself, I just didn't think they looked like my fellow countrymen. Something deep in my genes told me something was off. If I had to guess, I might have said they were Chinese.

They were all dressed in perfectly ordinary clothes, almost like they didn't care if a wandering patrolman spotted them. Their shirts and pants were all the sort of thing you could find year-round at any bargain clothing shop. Over their clothes they wore windbreakers, parkas, jackets, coats. All kinds of things, none of them suited for the same season—but there were plenty of dark colors, probably to make it easier for them to blend into the night.

They had one more thing in common: all of them had their right hands in their pockets, like they were holding onto something so they could pull it out at any time.

Each of them approached from a different direction, then stopped when they got close to my house. They looked to make sure there was no one else around, then collectively pulled their hands out of their pockets. They were all wearing thin gloves and carrying stun guns, along with—

"Ooh! Those are Type 64 silenced pistols! I didn't know they were still using those."

Two of the men were carrying weapons that brought an innocent joy to my dad, the light-novel author Kanou Shougo.

"What are you talking about?" I said, turning toward him. My dad was a gun nut who knew all sorts of obscure trivia like this.

"It's a silenced handgun used for special operations. The unique thing about it is that it's designed with the suppressor, the part that makes it shoot quietly, built right into it. It dates from the Vietnam War, and I thought they stopped using them after they introduced the Type 67. Maybe they never bothered giving new ones to people stationed in a quiet country like Japan."

"Huh," I said, my answer reflecting my deep indifference to all of that.

My mind, meanwhile, went straight to the two (probably, maybe) Chinese women who had attacked us in Akihabara. Were these men here because the women had failed and someone—their superiors, their country?—was ready to resort to more certain and more violent means?

This was all turning into a major pain.

“They fire small-caliber, subsonic rounds, so relatively speaking they’re not that powerful. I think.”

“And what, that’s supposed to make us feel better?” I sighed and looked back at my computer screen. The 27-inch liquid crystal display had several windows open on it, showing the approaching men from a variety of angles.

We were in my mom’s room, by the way, and this was my mom’s computer. The six-mat room I called my own wasn’t exactly cramped, but with me, Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia in there—and then adding my mom, my dad, and my sister Shizuki, it would have gotten awfully cozy. In fact, I figured it would turn into a bit of a sauna, even without the heat on...

“Are these people after you, Master...?” Myusel asked in a whisper.

Elvia, perplexed and equally quiet, pointed to something on the screen. “What’ve they got in their hands here?”

“Those are guns, like Minori-san’s weapon. And the rest of them have stun guns—I assume.”

“Skun gans?”

“Stun guns. They deliver a strong electric shock—uh, like a portable lightning bolt. They can knock someone out.”

“So it’s like a magic item for lightning attacks?” Myusel asked.

“I guess you could think of it that way,” I said, and then I looked back toward my mother, Kanou Sakiko, who had been silently working at the computer. “Listen, Mom...”

“What?” Her hands were flying across the keyboard; she didn’t even look at me. I had no idea what she was doing...

“Why do you even have this?”

“This” was the optical devices that were currently displaying real-time feeds on our screen—in other words, security cameras.

“Because we bought it, obviously.”

“Back before they raised the consumption tax,” my dad offered. What a mundane reason.

“I mean, why does a private household even need security cameras?!”

One camera I could understand. But we had so many, it was crazy. There must have been at least eight separate cameras sending us the views we were looking at now.

“Ahh, you just can’t be too careful these days,” my dad said.

“Things happen sometimes,” my mom added, still tapping away on the

keyboard. “Frothing fans of your father show up, and the police have to get involved. You must remember, Shinichi.”

“Oh...” I vaguely recalled something like that happening once every three or four years.

“And there’s a young woman in the house,” my dad said, and then he and my mom shared a “*Right?!*” look.

Shizuki (the young woman in question) didn’t say anything. She wasn’t the least bit amused by this overprotectiveness, but since it was explicitly for her benefit, she couldn’t exactly object, either. She just stood there looking annoyed.

I guess nowadays there were security cameras on half the street corners, and with cameras getting cheaper even as their resolution got better and better, there was no real reason a private residence shouldn’t have a system like this.

“Your mom and dad worked hard to make this happen,” my mom said.

“We buried some of the cameras in walls and made covers for others so they’d be hard to see.” My parents were both smiling beatifically.

“That sounds less like hard work and more like an arts and crafts project,” I shot back immediately.

If you were really worried about security, the smart thing to do was to put a camera right out in the open, like, *Hey, here’s a camera!* Once you started hiding them, you got into creeper territory real quick.

I hadn’t even noticed the equipment myself, so it must have been really well hidden. Reflecting on my parents’ already dubious personalities, it wasn’t hard to imagine them gleefully pursuing the project together. Otherwise how would they have ended up with such high-res cameras in places full-fledged secret agents wouldn’t spot them? Then again, the spooks probably didn’t even imagine a private home would have a setup like this.

The image we were looking at was so sharp that we could pick out the type of handguns they were using even though it was the middle of the night. I wouldn’t have put it past my parents to have installed infrared sensors, too.

“Well, we looked at the options and just wanted to try some different things.”

“Not to mention, decommissioned military night-vision equipment is

starting to make its way onto the market."

"The market for who? Other than you, I mean..."

I turned away from my parents, who still seemed inordinately proud of themselves, and looked at the agents on the screen again. A moderately crazed reader was one thing, but I have to say I never expected Chinese (???) secret agents to show up at my house.

Neither, it looked like, had my parents...

"This is like a plot twist out of a light novel, eh, Mom?" my dad said.

"They do say truth is stranger than fiction."

"You're recording this, right? I might use it for one of my books sometime."

"In HD, dear."

When I heard my parents bantering back and forth in spite of the nerve-racking situation, I felt some of the tension drain out of my body. I wasn't sure if they didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation, or if they were simply made of sterner stuff than I'd been giving them credit for. Either way, I owed them an awful lot...

"Uh... hey." Shizuki was the only one who didn't seem to quite follow what was happening. She sounded less scared than just sort of put out. I guess that was understandable. Try telling a random high school girl that a Chinese assault squad is knocking at her door—it wouldn't seem real. "I don't exactly get it. Who are these people? Are those real guns?"

"Uhhh..." I thought as quick as I could to come up with a story. "You remember I said Petralka was a princess, right?"

"Uh-huh..."

"Well, people from the country of, uh, pandas want to kidnap her while she's here. I could tell you why, but there's a bunch of, you know, international relations stuff involved."

Shizuki didn't answer, but only stared at me. To her, I was just her no-account shut-in otaku of an older brother, and she probably had trouble believing I was really caught up in anything on that scale.

"Myusel," I said, putting my hand on her shoulder where she stood beside me.

"Yes, sir?"

"If push comes to shove, I'm trusting you with Shizuki and Petralka."

They were the only two among us who had no way of their own to fight. Er, well, my dad probably didn't, either. I really doubted the "correspondence karate course" had taught him anything that would help against professional brawlers, but—well, women and children first, right? Myusel's wind magic should allow her to deflect bullets and maybe land a hit on the enemy.

"Yes, sir...!" She clenched both fists and nodded at me... but then she hesitated for a moment. "Er, Master... You..."

"I can fall back on what you taught me, Myusel," I said, keeping my voice down. I had to be careful not to mention magic in front of my parents and Shizuki.

Our talk was interrupted by Elvia, looking at the screen, who exclaimed, "It looks like they're gonna come in any minute!"

I glanced over and saw she was right: the men had gathered at the back door of the house and seemed to be touching it. Maybe they were trying the lock.

"L-Listen, I think we should call the police..." Shizuki, who at least understood that this was no laughing matter, was getting out her phone.

But I shook my head. "If that were a good idea, Matoba-san... I mean, the Japanese government official I talked to, he would have already alerted the local authorities."

He'd had the good grace to let me know when he found out my security detail had been neutralized, but that meant the police probably weren't on their way. I assumed they hadn't been given any details of my presence in the area for security reasons, and maybe some assemblyperson who was friendly with the Chinese was even leaning on them to stay out of it. I had no way of knowing.

There was also a pretty good chance our cell signal was being blocked. They didn't seem to have cut our landline, presumably because it would have drawn attention to them by affecting the entire neighborhood; even the phone company might have noticed that there was an outage.

So maybe we could have called the cops and told them we were being robbed or something, but it was too late now. By the time the police got here, it would all be over. That was how fast the agent(-ish) men were working.

"But... what *do* we do?" I wondered aloud.

It looked like our only choice was to fight them ourselves. But could we possibly?

Our opponents were obviously professional fighters. This wasn't like facing down the JSDF special forces in Eldant. We'd had our own trained brawlers then—the knights of the Eldant Empire. We'd had Garius and Brooke. But now? Myusel, Elvia, and I were the only ones with any ability to fight at all. My mom, maybe a little. But even if she could handle herself in hand-to-hand combat, I just didn't think a housewife had much chance confronted by enemies who not only knew martial arts but had ranged weapons and stun guns. Myusel's and my magic gave us ranged abilities the agents didn't know about, and I doubted they were aware of Elvia's superhuman physical strength, either. Those things would probably offer our only opportunities.

But how could we actually use them?

At the moment, we knew everything about the agents—what they looked like, where they were, what they were doing. We could use that information to launch a surprise attack. In this house, though, what was the best place for that? How should we set it up?

"...Man, digital equipment is really something else these days," I said.

I couldn't believe the image was so clear. We could see more than just their faces; we could make out the actual weapons they were holding. If what my parents had been saying was true, you could even record at this resolution. Considering that apparently any Neanderthal of a DIY handyman could hide the things so well that even trained agents didn't notice them, it looked like there was hardly anything to complain about with the cameras.

"It's like watching a movie," I added, inspired by the unreality of the moment and the pristineness of the image. It looked so good I practically wanted other people to see it, too.

.....Wait, hang on.

"That's it."

"Shinichi?" Petralka looked at me in surprise. *Ahh, the sweet befuddlement this empress shows me sometimes it's just so cu—okay, not time for moe now!*

"Yes, that's it. That's what we'll do." I looked at her with one of those smiles you get when you have a wonderful, awful idea.

"Have you thought of something?" Petralka pressed. I nodded, then reached for the mouse and keyboard. My mom looked like she was about to object, but then she just silently moved aside.

"We're online, right?"

"Yeah, but you can't call 110 from the internet," my dad said. "Given most telephone landlines and internet cables are buried underground these days, they probably can't cut just ours."

He was right. But we would teach those people (probably) from that panda country what a mistake it had been not to try.

"This is just such a good-looking image, I said," pointing to the screen. "I want everyone in the whole world to see it."

The agents went around the back of the house and began by infiltrating the garden. They double-checked that the lights in the house were off. Then they placed some sort of cloth or something against the window of the living room, which faced the garden, and smacked it with the guns they were carrying.

Ahh, okay. They were causing a partial break in the glass there.

My dad had told me once that in real life, it's very hard to make a nice, round hole in a piece of glass like you might see someone do in manga or anime. It's not like using an X-Acto knife to cut a circle in a piece of paper. It's not like in the movies where they scratch a circle in the glass, then slap on some special tool that pops out a segment.

No, the agents were using some kind of sticky covering to dampen the sound and minimize scatter while they broke the window. No one would hear them and they would be less likely to end up with a bunch of broken glass all over.

None of us spoke.

One of the agents reached through the hole in the window, undid the crescent lock, and then they all came tramping in without even taking off their shoes.

At that moment—

"Oof!"

The lead agent stumbled backward with a short, sharp exhalation.

The kick that came flying out of the darkness had taken him square in the face. Even a professional fighter like him couldn't defend against such a sudden attack; he fell spectacularly onto the floor and stopped moving. Out cold, I guessed.

The other agents shouted, softly. Definitely not in Japanese. It really did sound kind of like Chinese to me. The excited tones suggested they were saying something like, "What the hell just happened?!"

"Hrgh!"

While they were whispering to one another, another agent was attacked. This one found a leg swept out from under him, costing him his balance, before a rising uppercut caught him in the solar plexus. He rose nearly a

meter up in the air before collapsing to the ground with a dull thud like his comrade.

There was another excited burst of the foreign language. The remaining agents took a step back, guns at the ready as they tried to ascertain who or what was attacking them.

She didn't pursue them, though—I had warned her not to do anything reckless—but crouched on all fours where the agents weren't likely to spot her.

It was Elvia.

The living room was dark, obviously—but Elvia had strong night vision, and could even locate her opponents by smell, so a lack of light was no problem for her. Even a glancing blow from her beast-person muscles, so much stronger than a human's, was more than enough to knock a man out.

Of course, the agents had snuck up to the house without any light; their eyes were adjusted to the dark. They finally located Elvia, who looked like a wolf prepared to spring on her prey at any moment. The agents looked at each other, but they had their composure back now. They leveled their guns at Elvia.

They didn't fire immediately, maybe because killing wasn't their objective.

"You come with us!" they ordered in heavily accented Japanese.

Elvia, obviously, wasn't about to just meekly go along with them—she probably didn't even understand them that well. She just growled quietly, like an animal.

"Okay, that's enough," I said, and suddenly the area was flooded with light.

I had really just flipped the nearby light switch from my place by the wall, but the agents, suddenly assaulted by the bright light, took a startled step backward, holding their hands up to shield their faces.

It was only a second, but it took their eyes off Elvia and made them move their guns just a little.

She didn't let the opportunity go to waste. Elvia kicked off the floor, leaping at them. The agents tried to respond, but they probably didn't have a lot of experience with an "animal" attacking from below waist level. They couldn't get a good aim. Elvia knocked one of them over, and he hit his head on the floor. She drove a fist into his solar plexus, and the agent went

unconscious without a sound.

That made three.

That was all our little ambush was going to get us, though.

“Do not move!”

Pew! I guess a silencer doesn’t actually silence a gunshot completely. Suddenly there was a hole in the wall. A warning shot. Even Elvia couldn’t move faster than a speeding bullet. She froze where she was.

“If you will behave, we do not kill you. You come with us, Kanou Shinichi.”

A classic threat. But I didn’t answer. I just nodded, smiling.

The agent didn’t seem to like that. “You come with us!” He sounded more agitated now. Even a civilian like me could practically hear the murderousness in his voice—but I was also aware of my lips turning up in the biggest grin I had ever grinned. Uh-oh. I just couldn’t hold it in. I didn’t have a mirror, so I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I was smirking like the last boss of some video game.

I was looking at the ground, but my shoulders had started to shake. The agent must have taken me for terrified—so it took him a moment to realize that the sound I was making was suppressed laughter.

“What is so fun—”

“Hey.” Still grinning, I held up the thing I had been holding in my hand this whole time. “You know what this is?”

It was a perfectly ordinary smartphone, the one I used every day.

Specifically, its screen.

I had one particular app open. And the agent was right there on the screen for all to see.

Let’s turn back the clock just a little, to the moment when the Chinese agents were breaking through our fence and moving into the garden.

“...There.”

Sitting at the keyboard of my mother’s computer, tapping away on the keys, was... Shizuki. On the LCD screen was the Twitter client, with which I was so familiar. Shizuki was tweeting away.

“Spread the word.”

She was tweeting out using her own Twitter account, and we hoped her friends would pick up on the post and retweet it far and wide, until it was all over the internet.

I guess there were plenty of high school girls still awake even at this time of night, because the chime indicating we’d been retweeted just kept dinging. It started to sound like a machine gun. Shizuki put a similar message out on LINE, then opened a browser window and started posting on social networking services. She was trying to get the message to every friend she had. Each post ended the same way: *Spread the word.*

“Wow,” I breathed. That was the power of high school girls on Twitter, LINE, and the like. Shizuki’s short post, photo, and the URL she’d included were speeding around the world. “I know it was my idea, but... I’m still kind of amazed. And honestly, kind of scared.”

“This?” Shizuki said, not even looking at me. “This is nothing.”

That explained why even the most insipid post could set Twitter on fire. Once the retweets started, there was no stopping them.

“Thanks,” I said. “This is a big help.”

Despite my sincere words of gratitude, my sister still didn’t look at me. “...Whatever. Anyone can throw a web link out there.” Still, I thought I caught a hint of bashfulness in her tone. Aaargh—she really was a tsundere. It was adorable.

I knew better than to voice those thoughts by this point, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

At any rate, I was starting to feel like things might turn out all right. I grinned at the ongoing stream of dings and retweet notifications. The Twitter client was still open on the screen, along with a tweet:

tfw pandaland secret agents try to break into ur house lololol

The post also included a link... to a live video stream.

Back to the present. I was grinning evilly as I showed the agents my cell

phone, which was displaying an ongoing livestream.

"You know about Ni** Nama?"

The agents didn't respond, but I was sure they were listening to me. Speaking slowly so they would be certain to understand me, I said, "Right this minute, we're broadcasting live around the world."

From just over my shoulder, a security camera we'd hastily set up was recording the agents' every move and sending the video straight to the web.

They looked shocked.

"Man, this is something else. We've already got over ten thousand viewers. And more comments than I can count!" Even as I spoke, the number of viewers was shooting up. I actually had the comments hidden because they were coming so thick and fast they nearly blocked out the video. "Electronics today are just amazing, huh? Great pictures, instant communications. Just like this."

It actually wasn't just the live feed we put online. We'd also shared the security camera footage of the agents working their way up to the house—but I didn't feel I needed to give them all the specifics.

The agents looked at each other, panic evident on their faces. They may not have spoken perfect Japanese, but they had been posted to this country and there was a good chance they understood perfectly well what I was saying. Livestream sites and Twitter-type services had gotten pretty popular in China, too, recently.

If nothing else, they definitely got that they were in a tight spot.

Incidentally... other than myself and Elvia, I had everyone else stay hidden in the room on the second floor. After I charged Myusel with protecting Petralka and my family, Elvia and I went down to meet the agents. Between Elvia's physical abilities and my magic spell, I hoped we could make something work.

I faced my phone back towards me again and set comments to show. Bam! A zillion words filled my screen.

"Is this for real?"
"Clickbait!"
"It's the real thing, man"
"That was a silenced pistol shot!!"
"Reported"

“rptd”
“Reported”
.....

These and similar posts were flying across the screen.

“I don’t know if you’re here to kill us or kidnap us or what,” I said, turning the screen back toward the agent. “But are you sure you want to do it in front of all these people?”

“Grr,” the agents growled. I smiled triumphantly.

Inside, though, I was shaking and sweating. *Please go away please go away I’m begging you please go away...!*

If the agents decided things were too stacked against them here and left, great. We wouldn’t have to fight them. But if they decided they were in too deep already—well, they were still the ones with the guns. And so far they hadn’t put them down.

I stood silently. It was looking like I’d bet wrong. I pulled out my sprite bottle and started chanting my spell under my breath. Elvia stood to cover me.

Bad bad bad bad!

Three people unconscious on the floor, five more with guns pointed at us. Just the two of us to fight back. If they were willing to kill one of us and kidnap the other, then the odds weren’t in our favor. However strong Elvia might have been, fighting five armed men at point-blank range was too much even for her.

Just as I was doing these frantic mental calculations, though—

“Oh.”

—I let out a stupefied mumble.

The reason was the shadow I saw coming up from behind the man. It was—

“Grgh!” One of the agents went down with a small shout. The others spun around to find a young man with a shovel standing behind them.

“Reito-san?!” I exclaimed.

Ariga Reito. Owner of the *Rental☆Madoka* itasha. With his black shirt, fingerless gloves, and overlong hair, he might as well have been carrying a sign that said *I’m an otaku, nice to meet ya.*

He was the one who had helped rescue Myusel and Petralka when they

had been nearly kidnapped in Akihabara. He didn't know much about what was going on, but after he parked his car at my house, he decided to stick around because he thought it looked like things might turn interesting. (I found the logic a little hard to follow.)

Er... I'm very sorry, Reito-san. I had completely forgotten about you.

"T-Take that!" Reito-san said, brandishing the shovel over the fallen agent.

The tool had come from our garden. Reito-san had grabbed it, snuck up behind our attackers, and smacked them with it. A shovel was a superb weapon, capable of taking off someone's head when used properly. And with its solid metal spade, it could stop a projectile more reliably than a bulletproof vest.

"Why, you...!" One of the agents leveled his gun at Reito-san. One eyeblink later, though, Elvia was on him. She grabbed his wrists and forced him to the floor. That obviously didn't render him unconscious, though, and he kept struggling. The gun went off once, then twice, the bullets ripping into the walls and ceiling. Reito-san and I both dove for cover.

Then one of the agents shouted something in Chinese (probably). It must have been some kind of signal, because the others suddenly started behaving very differently. The guy Elvia had a hold on tossed his gun away and kicked her in the stomach, gaining himself some distance from her. She might have been strong, but she was light, making it easy to fling her off. She never hit the wall, but landed on all fours, never in any danger.

"Elvia, are you okay?"

"Oh-kay!" she shouted. Apparently she had picked up at least that much Japanese.

Even so, she tottered a little; it couldn't have been pleasant to get kicked in the stomach.

The agents were shouting again, taking the opportunity to pick up their fallen comrades and weapons, after which they beat a hasty exit towards the garden. Elvia instinctively made to go after them.

"Stop, you don't have to chase them!" I said, grabbing her as she went speeding past. "If they retreat, we win! Remember?"

"Oh yeah..." I guess the excitement of battle had driven that fact out of her mind.

Elvia blinked like she was coming out of a trance, and then with a long

sigh I felt her go limp. She may have been a werewolf, but she was still a young girl—she was probably scared.

“But why did they suddenly...?”

“Maybe ’cause half of ’em got beat up?” Reito-san offered. “I’m betting they’re Chinese. The last thing they would want is to be picked up by the Japanese police. They probably decided they wouldn’t all be able to get away if any more of them got knocked out.”

“Yeah... That makes sense.” It *would* be pretty hard to move carrying two or three people your own size. And they didn’t want their unconscious friends captured alive.

“Anyway, what the heck was all that about?” Reito-san said, tossing the shovel back into the garden. “I was out there in my car when I saw some weird guys come in, so I just kinda followed them. I was watching from the garden when all of a sudden you guys jumped them...”

“Ha ha ha, haaa...” Not sure what to say, I tried to just laugh it off.

Reito-san, though, helpfully came up with a misunderstanding of his own. “Hey, were you guys filming a movie or something?! I didn’t crash your set, did I?!” He looked around, trying to find a camera.

Come to think of it, in this world, we—especially Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia—were supposedly involved in a canceled fantasy film.

“Did I at least look cool?! Did the whole world see me doing my thing? Is there a Hollywood debut in my future? Shoot, I gotta practice my autograph!”

“Well, I think you looked great.”

Not in a movie, granted, but on a live video streaming site.

Reito-san continued to be weirdly excited about the whole thing as I just looked at him.

“Ah, Shinichi-kun, so you’re all right.”

Matoba-san had appeared almost as soon as the agents had vanished. It was almost like they were handing off to each other—but even I thought that was a little too much conspiracy-think. Matoba-san probably wasn’t involved this time. Otherwise, why would he have warned me in the first

place?

He had his hair parted to one side as usual, and was wearing a drab suit, as usual. He was, as ever, the very embodiment of what people thought of when they heard the word *bureaucrat*. Which made a certain amount of sense, considering that's what he was—Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, an organ of the Japanese government. He was also, as a matter of fact, my direct superior at Amutech.

He wasn't a bad person, exactly, but he wasn't really good, either. He was nice enough to me, but I wasn't completely confident I could trust him when the chips were really down.

But anyway...

"Yeah, I guess."

As I showed Matoba-san to our living room, I gave him the short version of how we had driven our attackers off. The posts on Twitter, LINE, and social media, along with the video streaming site.

"I see," Matoba-san said, impressed, a slight smile coming over his face. "You might say I expected no less from you. You always were a quick thinker."

Matoba-san was hard to read—he could look like the most innocent thing in the world, all the while calmly plotting some awful scheme. So I wasn't sure if he was really that impressed with me or not.

"I understand the broadcast is over now," he said, "but is it possible someone might have recorded it and could put it up on YouTube, say?"

I could see Myusel cleaning up the muddy footprints on the floor and rearranging the furniture that had been shoved around in the fighting. My family was helping her, as for some reason was Reito-san. I shrugged.

Once something goes up on the net, taking it down is virtually impossible. All those guys' faces could be floating around cyberspace more or less for eternity.

"I doubt your new friends will find much refuge," Matoba-san said with a sad smile. "I suspect their country will disown them. Suddenly they'll find themselves stateless vagrants. As a government employee myself, I feel a bit sorry for them."

"Do you, now?"

Honestly, whatever happened to those guys didn't much matter to me. When you force your way into someone's house with a gun, you pretty

much deserve what you get: internet infamy, national abandonment, whatever.

The point was, we had managed to survive the crisis. Only once I was talking with Matoba-san did I feel like we had really and truly done it. At last, I let out a sigh of relief.

Chapter Two: Operation Rescue Minori-san

It was morning by the time we finished straightening up the living room. I wasn't too sleepy, though—maybe it was the few winks I had managed to catch, or maybe it was just the excitement—and I proceeded immediately to hold a strategy meeting with Myusel in my room.

"These are all the sprite bottles we have left..." I looked at the row of palm-sized ceramic jars. They looked strangely like bullets. I guess, in the sense that they allowed us to fire off our magic, they sort of were. "As for the magic stones, we should probably have as many on us as we can."

"Shinichi-sama, there are still more."

From my gun-nut father's stash of airsoft equipment we'd gotten a field vest with plenty of pockets, which we'd stuffed with all the sprite bottles they would hold. Our fingers, meanwhile, were bedecked with magical stones, which we treated like accessories. There were still bottles and stones we weren't able to keep directly on us; these we put in a backpack also procured from my dad's stuff.

Once we were outfitted with every magic-supplying item we could manage, we discovered it was all pretty heavy.

"Is... Is this all of it?" I mumbled, looking around the room—and that was when I noticed the door was slightly ajar. Myusel had spotted it before I had, and was staring intently in that direction. And then...

"...Oops."

Our eyes met hers.

"What're you peeping at?" I said.

"I'm not p-*peeping* at anything!" Shizuki said from the crack in the door, through which she was clearly peeping. "The door just happened to be open! I just wanted to make sure my big brother wasn't doing anything *weird* to Myusel-san, alone in this room together..."

"If you want to know what's going on in here, then just come right in!"

We weren't doing anything wrong, and didn't have anything to hide.

Er... except I guess it would be tricky if she asked what the bottles or the rocks were for. I still hadn't used magic in front of my family. If worst really came to worst, I didn't think I would be able to pass it all off by muttering about state secrets.

"It's creepy to have you just peering in there," I added. "It's like some kind of horror movie."

"You're one to talk about creepy, you nasty otaku!" Shizuki exclaimed.

I let out a sigh, then looked down and went back to my preparations. Maybe I should bring the stun guns the agents had dropped? Or maybe it would be better not to fool around with weapons I didn't really understand. Hmmm.

I kept mulling it over, but Shizuki didn't go anywhere; she just stood at the door watching me.

"What do you want?" I finally asked.

"Huh? I, uh, I just..." She couldn't quite come up with anything. Why was she here?

After a moment of what seemed to be intense thought, Shizuki looked first to the right, then to the left, then up, then down... anywhere except at me. She crossed her arms, obviously deeply uncomfortable, but finally she said softly, "I guess I... misjudged you. A little."

"What...?" I said dumbly. I was completely shocked to hear her say that, when just a minute ago she had been accusing me of being a "nasty otaku." So shocked, in fact, that I thought I'd misheard her. "C... Come again?"

"I mean the way you chased off those, like, spies from China or wherever. I always thought you were just a good-for-nothing otaku, but..."

I wasn't sure whether it was worse to be a nasty otaku or a good-for-nothing one... but I guess it wasn't exactly worth worrying about at that moment. More than anything, I was just stunned to hear Shizuki say that. She was practically complimenting me.

Hoping to act the part of the cool, composed older brother, I put a sort of wry smile on my face. "The truth is, I didn't do anything. It was Mom and Dad's security system that even gave us anything to put on Egao Video. And you were the one who helped spread it all over the web."

Shizuki didn't say anything, so neither did I.

I counted the bottles and stones in the vest and backpack one more time,

made sure we hadn’t forgotten anything, then zipped everything up. “Okay,” I finally said.

Myusel appeared to be ready, too; we looked at each other and nodded. We seemed to be thinking the exact same thing, without saying a word to each other. It made me happy somehow.

I was just savoring that little thrill when...

“What *are* you doing, anyway?” Shizuki asked with just a hint of annoyance.

“Hm? Getting ready,” I said.

“Are you... planning something else?” As I hefted a backpack, Shizuki frowned and took a step into the room. “You scared off those guys. Isn’t that enough?”

“We have to go rescue the princess,” I said. “Er... although, she’s not a princess.”

“What?” Shizuki said flatly, furrowing her eyebrows. Now she was ticked for sure. Ah, I knew this expression. It was the same look she got when me and our parents were geeking out over something and she was the only one who wasn’t part of the fun. The look was part mocking and part angry. “That’s a really creepy way of putting it.”

“Wh-What’s creepy about it?”

“It’s the whole let’s-pretend thing. Like you’re in a manga or something. It’s stupid. That’s why I hate otaku.”

“Shizuki-sama...” Myusel looked distressed by Shizuki’s aggressive tone. She hated to hear me, her master, attacked like this, but the person doing it was my own younger sister, so Myusel couldn’t outright fight back—and she didn’t know what to do instead.

I guess to an outside observer, we would have just looked like two siblings fighting. But I didn’t really think of it as a fight at all.

“Shizuki...”

I faced her square on. She seemed a little surprised, but she didn’t look away, just blinked and held eye contact with me. I realized it had been years probably since I had looked her full in the face like this. After all, we had hardly even talked much.

“You’re right. Lots of manga and anime show someone defenseless or captured being saved.”

“Huh? Er, yeah, I... I guess...”

“But that’s perfectly normal, right?”

My sister didn’t say anything.

“It was manga and anime that taught me that,” I said as evenly as I could.

I didn’t mind if Shizuki said she hated otaku. Everyone had their own tastes and preferences, and if you were free to like whatever you wanted, then I thought you were free to dislike whatever you wanted, too. I didn’t want to force her to like anime or manga or games or anything.

But for some people, anime, manga, novels, and the like could actually be like a textbook, giving you some direction for how to live. At least, they had been for me. So if nothing else, I didn’t want her to act as if they shouldn’t exist.

“A teacher in elementary school told me once... *Manga are books, too. If you read them carefully, you can learn from them.*”

I could remember it like it was yesterday. Then, long afterwards, I had gone to Eldant. I had been used as a tool of cultural invasion. But that was all the more reason why I understood: the real question lay with the people who were being exposed to these things. It could be a poison—or it could be a cure.

This wasn't just true of otaku stuff—pretty much anything could be that way, I suspected. It might seem so ordinary, so widespread, as to be beneath notice. And that was exactly why people would take it for granted...

Shizuki stood pouting for a moment, but she didn't shoot back at me right away. She wasn't going to pass off everything I said just because she had pigeonholed me as a "nasty otaku." My guess was she was actually chewing on what I'd said, digesting it in her own way. I thought that explained the pout: there was still something there she wasn't quite buying.

Gosh. This was all I had to do: *talk to her*. Why hadn't I been able to do that during my days as a home security guard?

Despite the creeping sense of self-loathing, I smiled at Shizuki. "Shizuki, if you really thought I was just pretending... Well, I hope at least I looked good doing it."

"What are you, an idiot?" she said instantly, still in a perfectly awful mood.

Wooh. I guess Shizuki was still Shizuki. I couldn't expect us just to go back to the way we used to be; it was too much to think she might suddenly exclaim, "I love you, Big Bro!" Which I guess would be kind of embarrassing at this point, anyway.

I watched her leave my room, then turned to Myusel with a half-grin on my face. "Did you see that? I think she was actually worried about me there."

"Yes, sir!" Myusel nodded, her face shining.

"All right, shall we go?" I asked, pulling on the vest and then the backpack.

"Uh—Um, Shinichi-sama?" Myusel grabbed my hand before I could walk out.

"Something wrong?"

"Well, uh..." Now that we were touching, the magic ring could work. Myusel lowered her eyes shyly and said, "Shinichi-sama, I think... I think you are always 'cool.'"

For an instant, my mind virtually froze in a cascade of joy.

Her fingers touching mine seemed warm somehow; it was probably, I'm sure, most likely, just my imagination, so... on reflection, yes, it was just so we could talk, but here I was alone in my room with Myusel, holding hands, and I know maybe you're like *yeah what you're just noticing this now?* but

still, uh.

"Uh, um... th—well, thanks..." I managed to squeak out.

Don't be deceived, Kanou Shinichi! Myusel's just reassuring you, she's trying to counter Shizuki's parting shot...!

Arrrrgh, she is just so sweet*!!*

.....etc., etc.

Anyway, things were what they were, so I kept insisting to myself that this was all there was to it, trying to slow the furious beating of my heart. I nodded at Myusel. "L-Let's get going, eh?"

"Y-Yes, sir."

We both nodded hesitantly at each other and left the room.

We found everyone in the living room. Petralka and Elvia were sitting listlessly on the sofa, but my dad had his laptop open and was typing away, while my mom and Shizuki had a tablet and a smartphone out, respectively.

Matoba-san, incidentally, wasn't here; he'd said something about having to make a report and left. He'd said he would be back soon, but there was also something about not being able to call us because the phones might be bugged. Reito-san wasn't in the living room, either. Maybe he'd gone home. Too bad: I hadn't had a chance to thank him for all he'd done.

"So... Any luck?" I said, sitting down next to my father. "Did you find anything?"

Twitter was open on his laptop. I assumed it was the same for my mom and Shizuki. What were they all doing? Well... they were using Twitter to try to find information about Minori-san.

As some of the comments on our chasing-away-Chinese-agents video remarked, we were unquestionably internet famous now. We had been in that making-of video, and the trailer for the alleged fantasy movie. After all, that's why there had been such a big crowd in Akihabara in the first place after news of our presence there went viral.

This was the age of a billion spies, when everyone had smartphones or mobile devices; you could find information anywhere and upload it to the net. That was doubly so when somebody happened to see the star of a

movie somewhere—a movie that had aroused controversy (I thought) and whose stars were all debuting in this film, with no prior record of them anywhere. When people spotted someone like that, they tended to take pictures, and those pictures tended to end up online.

I'm not saying that's inherently a good thing—there are all kinds of concerns about image-use rights and privacy and such—but in this particular case, we were willing to let it work for us. No matter how good that Russian agent was, they wouldn't have just thrown a sack over Minori-san in the middle of Akihabara. Whatever they did—knock her unconscious, threaten her with a gun, force her into a car—there must have been people who saw it happen. Maybe even people who saw her when they moved her from the car to confinement.

"Aww, man, this is great," my dad said, grinning and pointing at the screen. He was doing searches on terms like *Akihabara*, *a certain movie*, and *sneak tourism*. "Can you believe it? Shinichi, they're saying, *'Explode, you damn real!'* They're saying, *'Explode, you damn real!'* About *you*! It's so important, I said it twice!"

"Why?!"

"Because you were walking around surrounded by beautiful ladies, obviously. No matter how you cut it, it totally looks like you've got a harem."

The tweet he was talking about included a picture of me with Myusel holding one hand, Petralka holding the other, and Elvia riding on my back.

Yikes, they even got shots of that...?!

The internet was terrifying!

...Okay, this wasn't the moment for such un-otaku-ish declarations.

"Fine, but what about Minori-san? Did you find anything?"

"All the searches just turn up tweets about your walk around Akiba this afternoon," my mom said, still swiping at her tablet. "I tried searching by name, but I didn't get anything."

Well, that was understandable. If you could find the name Koganuma Minori just from a picture of her face, that would already put you on a level with the CIA or some other intelligence operation. Not something the average person could do.

"Searching for *girl with big boobs and glasses* gets some good stuff," my dad said.

“Really? Let me see!” My mom said, leaning forward.

“Are you that interested in those pictures?!” I exclaimed.

As an ero-game designer, my mom had seen plenty of pop-idol swimsuit photo collections, nude photo shoots by actresses, and so on, so she had a pretty high tolerance for X-rated pictures.

“...Hey,” Shizuki broke in. “Isn’t this her?”

She set her phone face-up on the table so everyone could see it. We all leaned in.

On the screen was the ubiquitous Twitter app. And there was a photo, with the caption, *“Spotted this lady with a huge rack in the love hotel district—and she was with a white guy!”*

“The tweet is, you know, whatever. But isn’t that her in the picture?” Shizuki asked, enlarging the image attached to the post. It showed a white man walking through the love hotel district, accompanied by a woman. The quality wasn’t great, but it was definitely Minori-san.

“That’s her, that’s Minori-san!” I exclaimed.

“You found her?!” Petralka shouted, jumping up from the sofa. Myusel and Elvia joined her in rushing to look at the screen.

“Geeeez...” I said. Sure, this post helped us out—but you really couldn’t let your guard down for a second! You could be on an actual date, and someone could just sneak a bunch of photos of you and throw them up on the web. (Since people thought Minori-san was an actress, this apparently fell under what they considered to be the price of fame, a tacit understanding that it was okay to ignore her privacy.)

“And with a white guy,” my dad said. “That’s something.”

“How do you figure?!” I interjected before I could stop myself—but now wasn’t the time. “Where is this, anyway?”

I’m ashamed to say I had never so much as set foot in the part of town with all the love hotels—for that matter, I had never gone to a love hotel at all, so I didn’t have the first idea where this photo might’ve been taken.

“Looks like the time stamp is in the evening,” my dad offered, his arms crossed.

“Look at the shop with the sign back here,” my mom said. “Isn’t that—you know?” She was pointing to a big billboard just visible behind the hotel. It looked like some sort of fast food chain... “This place is pretty well known, but I think they just put it up recently. Hmm...” She fiddled with her

tablet, pulling up what looked like the home page of the restaurant. “Yeah, here it is. Hmm, Shougo-san, let me use that computer?”

“Sure,” my dad said, passing the laptop to her.

My mom set it on her knees, her fingers flying across the keyboard even quicker than my dad’s. “Shinichi, do you know Minori-san’s cell number?”

“Huh? Uhh...”

My mom was working so quick, I could barely keep up with her. I pulled out my own cell phone and gave her Minori-san’s number. Then I watched, stupefied, as she worked at the computer. And then...

“Bingo.” After a wait that felt like forever, my mom stopped and nodded. “Minori-san’s phone was destroyed in the evening.”

“Huh?” How could she be so sure?

“It’s close to the time stamp on the post. So’s the location. I think that makes this post seem awfully believable, don’t you?”

“But... But how did you...”

What had she been doing with that laptop?!

My mom only grinned slyly at me.

Ahh. I knew that look. It was the expression of bliss she’d gotten long ago when I had cut some scheduled summer activity to attend a certain anime event, and she’d triumphantly given the timing of my playing hooky down to the minute. She refused to tell me how she had done it, but I’m sure she had analyzed the GPS signal from my phone. That wasn’t really something the average person could do, though...

“That’s Mom for you,” my dad said, slapping his knees.

Uh, was this really praiseworthy? It seemed like maybe we were awful close to the wrong side of the law. But I let those doubts pass through my brain without letting them out my mouth.

“Mom, could you look at that location in Google Street View?”

“I’m on it.”

We would compare the picture with Minori-san to the street view of the location where her cell phone was destroyed. If they were the same, we were locked on.

My mom turned the laptop toward me so I could see the screen. It showed the same place as the photo of Minori-san.

Deliberately imitating my mother, I said, “...Bingo.”

Now we had a pretty good idea of where Minori-san was being held. The only thing left to do was act.

I put on the backpack stuffed with sprite bottles, magic stones, and the captured stun guns and got ready to leave the house with Myusel, Elvia, and Petralka. My mom said the love hotel district in the picture was a bit of a hike, so we would catch a taxi someplace to get over there.

But just as I was reviewing all this in my mind...

"Huh?"

The intercom buzzed.

I looked at the terminal my dad had put in the living room, where the intercom's camera revealed a man with parted hair, wearing a drab suit.

Of course, it was Matoba-san.

"Erk," I mumbled. "This is no good."

I was sure Matoba-san would try to stop us from going to help Minori-san. In his position, it was only natural. The whole reason they had classified Minori-san as already dead was so it would be easier to make her disappear in a situation just like this. I could even imagine him saying something like, "This was part of the plan all along."

I stood there frowning.

"Hello? Kanou household."

That was my dad, answering the intercom. He waved a hand at me, the sort of shooing gesture you might make at a cat or a dog. *Let me handle this*, he seemed to be saying. I guess he could tell what I was thinking.

"Oh—Matoba-san, wasn't it?" he said. "What brings you here today?" He was playing innocent, buying us time.

"You guys, slip out the back door," my mom whispered. "I don't see anyone over there on the security cameras."

"Mom..."

As my dad chatted with Matoba-san, continuing to hold him off, he typed something on his laptop, then turned it toward me: *It's incredible, Shinichi. You're like the protagonist of a light novel. Now, go rescue Minori-san.*

I was so grateful. I mentally thanked him, holding up one hand in a sort

of prayerful pose towards my parents. Then I nodded at Myusel and the others. “Let’s go.”

We hustled out the back door as quick as we could.

Oh—but what about our shoes? By the time the thought occurred to me, I was already at the door. To my surprise, though, I found shoes—not just mine, but Myusel’s and everyone else’s—lined up there neatly, the door already open.

“Quick!” The urging came from Shizuki. She must have been the one who had brought the shoes over. I could see that the rear gate was propped open, too.

“Thanks, Shizuki.”

“*Thank yoo*.”

Shizuki didn’t quite look at us—I guess she felt a little shy with us thanking her in person like this—and then we slipped through the back door.

There was just one problem.

“If we don’t get out on the main road, there’s no way we’ll find a taxi.”

What taxi ever just went down a random suburban side street? I searched my memory, trying to recall where the closest well-traveled thoroughfare was.

“Yo.”

The voice sounded so free and easy—and it accompanied a car sliding into view.

A Subaru Impreza—a WRX STI, at that.

It was one of Japan’s representative vehicles, a model even I, with a minimum of car knowledge, recognized. The design wasn’t as flashy as a Supra, a Skyline, or a Fairlady Z, and the displacement wasn’t that big, but it was a textbook example of simplicity and quality, a restrained but immensely capable vehicle that had dominated world rally time and time again.

This one, though, was adorned with the images of Madoka and Manami-san from *Rental☆Madoka*. It was a so-called itasha, with artwork of the girls covering every surface: across the hood and on the doors they lounged in swimsuits and smiled coquettishly. It would probably make a (non-otaku) car lover weep.

“Reito-san...!”

Looking out at us from the driver's seat of the ita-Impreza was Reito-san. I thought he had gone home—had he just been puttering around the neighborhood?

"Hop in," he said, flashing us a smile full of pearly whites. Then he added by way of explanation, "It looked like things were going to keep getting more interesting, so I took the liberty of hanging around."

"Well, thank you."

"You can thank me later. Now—come on!"

I nodded to Myusel and the others, then opened the rear door and motioned them inside. Myusel got in, then Petralka, then Elvia. Finally, I jumped in the front passenger seat.

"So—where to?"

"Here," I said, showing him the map of the love hotel district that I'd saved on my phone.

"Looks good. Seatbelts on!" Then he floored it. The Impreza launched forward like a bullet from a gun, my house receding quickly behind us.

That was when I noticed something: Shizuki had never gone back inside. She was watching us from the back door. As she vanished swiftly into the distance, I spotted a look of worry on her face.

Aaaargh, what was with her being so adorable?!

I didn't know if she could see me or not, but I poked my head out the window and nodded to say everything was okay. She opened her mouth and might have been saying something back, but I couldn't hear her over the roar of the accelerating Impreza.

The house got smaller and smaller, and then the car turned a corner, and I couldn't see my home anymore.

It's okay. Yeah. I'm sure of it.

I felt more like I was trying to convince myself than anyone else.

I swear: we will rescue Minori-san, together.

And then we would all go home.

We're coming, Minori-san, I said to myself, and gave an uncharacteristically serious clench of my fist.

We arrived among the love hotels. It really would have been too far to walk, but with a car it wasn't that bad. The streets were pretty empty, and our Impreza made it there in just over half an hour.

We got out and looked around. Considering the time, there was virtually no one there. Granted, half the places nearby were love hotels that were probably open 24/7. The rest were buildings dedicated to purposes I couldn't fathom.

And somewhere among all of it was Minori-san.

We didn't know what building or what room she might be in. Maybe we would just have to search them all...

"Hey, just a second," Reito-san said—he had gotten out of the car, too—as I was about to walk off with a sprite bottle in hand. He pulled out his phone and did something. Was he looking something up? What could it be?

"Reito-san...?"

Finally satisfied, he held the phone at about eye level and nodded at us. "Yep. That's the place." Then he pointed—not to a love hotel, but to a three-story building standing next to one. There was no sign and it didn't look very used; I would have believed you if you said it was abandoned.

"This building, it..."

"It's where Koganuma Minori is being held," Reito-san said confidently.

"Huh?! H-How do you know that?"

"Because it's leased to a company that does business with Russia," he said, again confidently.

Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia all looked at us perplexed, not quite able to follow what Reito-san and I were saying. The thing was, I didn't understand much better than they did.

"How did you figure that out so fast?" Smartphone or no smartphone, that seemed like awfully obscure info to come up with so quick. Some people might suspect an owner with a Russian name, but the building of a company supposedly doing business with Russia? Not everyone would come up with that off the top of their head. I'd already thought Reito-san might be smarter than he looked, but this...

"Who exactly—"

—*are you?* I was going to ask, but Reito-san interrupted me.

"There he is," he said and glanced over, his expression darkening.

"What...?"

I followed his gaze—and at that exact moment, I saw a white man emerge from the building and head in our direction. He was tall and very well-built. He had sculpted features, but was completely expressionless, like some kind of android. It was—

"Huh? Ah..."

Before I could stop him, Reito-san walked forward.

"What it is? What's wrong?" Petralka asked, clearly concerned, but I had no chance to answer.

Reito-san had slouched up to the white guy and was talking to him. "Uhh, hey, sorry man, but I'm a little lost. Could you—"

The guy didn't wait for the rest; he grabbed Reito-san. I didn't know much about martial arts, but even I could tell that this wasn't some get-em-by-the-collar intimidation tactic. He wasn't just taking hold of Reito-san, he was trying to fold his entire body—clearly a joint lock on the way to a choke. So this was sambo at work, or maybe systema. In any event, some kind of Russian military martial art.

All of a sudden, though, Reito-san was no longer in the man's arms. He took a half-step to the side, grabbed the man's extended arm, and—

"Ah?!"

The exclamation of surprise came from Elvia. With her exceptional eye for movement, she was probably the only one who fully appreciated what Reito-san had done. As for the rest of us, by the time we registered what was happening, the white guy had already been slammed into the asphalt by the throw.

"No way!"

"Hrgh..." the guy groaned. This wasn't like getting thrown onto a wood floor or a mat, something designed to help disperse some of the impact. Landing on solid ground would have been enough to put most people out of commission already (or so I had read in a book somewhere). The reason the police and even some military units learned the seemingly more subdued arts of judo and aikido, as opposed to more aggressive styles like karate or kenpo, was exactly because of their ability to overwhelm and control.

"Don't move."

Next thing that happened, the white guy discovered there was a gun stuck in his face. He froze.

Holding the weapon was Reito-san. He was standing a step away, the

gun fixed on his opponent. Exactly far enough to react if the guy tried to pull anything, I guessed.

No matter how you cut it, this obviously wasn't his first rodeo.

"R-Reito-san..."

He hadn't looked especially athletic, and he had seemed like the textbook otaku. Now he had flung an obviously powerful man to the ground and was standing there holding a gun on him. It was a picture we couldn't have imagined five seconds before, and all of us stared in shock.

"...Say good night," Reito-san growled, and then he let loose with a vicious stomp on the man's stomach. The Russian agent (I'm assuming he was) passed out without a sound.

And then...

"I figured this was the place," Reito-san said, stepping back from the Russian and glancing at us. "Ready to go?"

I stayed where I was, about three meters away from him, and said, "Hang on a second, Reito-san. Who in the heck are you?" And I wasn't going to be buying any more *just-a-passing-otaku* stuff.

"Just a passing otaku."

"Don't you have any other lines?!"

"Hm?"

"Okay, not the point—would a normal otaku have a gun?"

And not just any gun, but what appeared to be a pistol with a small silencer on the barrel—in other words, special-issue military stuff. I seemed to remember seeing the same kind of thing in my dad's airsoft collection. A SIG Sauer P228—a German model favored by Japanese police Special Assault Teams and the Coast Guard's Special Security Team.

In other words...

"It's a model gun." Reito-san tapped the P228 as if to say, *Look, plastic*.

"But... But you took down that huge guy so fast I hardly saw it."

"Oh, I've loved martial arts since I was a kid. You've practiced the kame**meha, right? It's pretty much the same thing."

"Reito-san..."

He was laughing loudly in an attempt to throw me off. Finally, though, he looked at Elvia and Myusel standing beside me and sighed, apparently deciding this wasn't the time for deception. "Just don't one-hit me with your magic, okay?"

I caught my breath, and my questions turned to certainty. He knew about magic—which meant he knew about the other world. I admit, we had used magic in front of him once, but we had never told him what it was. It could have been some special martial art, or ESP, for all he knew.

"I'm not your enemy," he said, the thin smile vanishing from his face.

"Okay, but what *are* you?"

"You know about the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office?"

I didn't say anything. How could I? The words took my breath away.

We stood in two groups in front of the nameless building. Elvia, Petralka, and I were to the right of the doorway. To the left were Myusel and Reito-san.

This was the division we'd come up with while trying to make sure that both groups had someone capable of ranged magic and someone who could survive hand-to-hand combat. Elvia and Reito-san would be our front line of defense. Myusel and I would be there for support.

We didn't speak. Reito-san nodded to us, then leaned over to peek inside.

I took an involuntary swallow. I could feel how nervous I was. To this point, it had always been the enemy moving against us, and I had been completely occupied with how to respond, but now I was going to go flying into the jaws of danger. Terror started wailing in a corner of my mind. A little late. There was no way we were turning back now.

I was standing there thinking vacantly about tracing the character for "person" on my palm—an old Japanese remedy for the jitters—when someone took my hand. Surprised, I glanced over and found myself looking into Petralka's eyes.

She nodded at me as if to say both *Calm down* and *It's okay*. I was sure she was as nervous as I was, but she was also an empress, and she knew how to appear under control. Looking into her emerald eyes, I somehow found her composure contagious.

I nodded back: *Thanks, I'll be fine*.

She smiled a little and let go of my hand. I was just a little bit sorry

about that.

I wished I could get back the sensation of her small, warm hand. I knew she had to let go; otherwise we wouldn't be able to move freely. But still...

Silently, Reito-san gave us the signal. He pointed into the building, then held up his pointer and middle fingers. *Two people inside*, it meant.

We had devised a strategy, albeit a simple one, ahead of time. We would take a look in the building, and if there was no one at the entrance, then we would sneak in with Reito-san at the head of our group. If it looked like there were agents inside, though, then Myusel and I would burst in and take them out with our magic.

Evidently there were people in there. That meant Myusel and I were up.

Unlike a gun, there's no explosion when you use Tifu Murottsu. And because it's a ranged attack, you can get the opponent before he can get to you. Perfect for a situation like this.

I took one deep breath. Forcing myself to be calm, I glanced into the building.

Yep: there was a sort of lobby or reception area up front; I could see elevator doors farther in. Two white men were sitting in chairs on either side of the elevator.

I took a sprite bottle from my vest and lobbed it into the building like a grenade.

The men jumped up, alarmed. When they realized that the thing lying shattered next to them was just some kind of ceramic jar, they looked at each other in relief. They must have assumed it *was* a grenade at first.

Naturally, they couldn't see the magical energy spilling out of the broken jar. It looked completely empty to them.

"Myusel!" I shouted.

"Yes, sir!" she said.

And then both of us jumped into the building.

The two guys were even more surprised to see us show up. We, however, were ready for them: we intoned the final words of the incantations we'd been reciting and held our hands out toward them.

“Tifu Murottsu!” we exclaimed together.

A violent wind erupted from our outstretched hands, a tornado that should never have existed indoors. It blew the men backward, slamming them against the wall. There were twin thumps, two groans, and then they both slid to the floor. They didn’t move again—they must have been knocked unconscious.

“We did it!” Myusel and I looked at each other and both clenched our fists, ecstatic about our success.

Look at us—we’re really strong!

That was probably giving ourselves too much credit—something we realized just a moment later.

Maybe someone heard the men crash against the wall, or maybe there were security cameras in there, but soon we heard rushing footsteps and voices shouting in a foreign language. Before Myusel and I could hide, four more men were in the room.

There was a lot more shouting (maybe in Russian?), and the men pulled their guns on us.

Two of them, however, were almost immediately knocked over by kicks from Reito-san and Elvia, who emerged from a hallway. Their guns went flying through the air. While Myusel and I had been dealing with the first two men, our close-combat troops had snuck in and ducked into the hallway.

Now Reito-san and Elvia were amidst our attackers. Two of them still had guns, but those were much harder to use in this chaotic situation. It would be too easy to shoot one of their friends—and in close quarters, a punch or kick is faster than trying to aim and shoot.

Of course, Myusel and I couldn’t offer backup, for the same reasons. So it was four agents versus our two friends—outnumbered two to one.

Aware of what had happened to their predecessors, though, the enemy obviously knew they couldn’t discount me and Myusel. With their attention divided, a punch from Reito-san and a kick from Elvia sent the men reeling.

And then—

“Fire!” Reito-san shouted, diving to the side. Elvia leapt in the other direction. Leaving just four vulnerable men right in front of me and Myusel.

“Tifu Murottsu!” we shouted again.

These four, like the first two, were slammed against the wall, grunted,

and crumpled. Reito-san went over and gave each of them a kick for good measure. It looked brutal, but it was the only way to be sure they were out cold.

At last, silence descended on the building.

“Is it over...?” Petralka asked, peeking in from the entryway.

“For now,” I nodded, and she came into the building.

“Are these filth the foreign spies who kidnapped Minori?”

We could tell the area was filled with the sprites from the bottle because the magic rings were working.

“Maybe, but I guarantee this isn’t all of them,” Reito-san said.

I was sure he was right. Even if there were some intruders, it wouldn’t make sense to send everyone in the building down at once. They must have had at least one or two people keeping an eye on Minori-san.

By the way, Reito-san had a magic ring now, too. Matoba-san had sent an extra one with us, just in case—apparently one that they had brought back to Japan to study. Letting Reito-san communicate telepathically with Myusel and Elvia was going to make the rescue operation go a lot smoother.

“It’s too early to celebrate,” Reito-san said. “We can’t let down our guard.”

This was definitely the time to let a professional take the lead, so we put Reito-san at the head of our group and set out to search the building for Minori-san.

“I downloaded the registered blueprints for the building to get us started,” Reito-san said, looking at his cell phone screen. “I don’t think the Russians would have enough architectural expertise here to screw with the floor plan, so the rooms ought to be where we expect them. Meaning...”

Reito-san apparently had something in mind. The rest of us followed behind him, working our way up to a third-floor hallway. He pointed to a door at the very end of it. “...She’s probably in there.”

The door was closed, but there didn’t seem to be any guards in front of it. We came slowly, carefully closer, and finally Reito-san put a hand to the door. He gently turned the knob. I guess it wasn’t locked.

Reito-san didn’t say anything, but he turned back and nodded at us. Without waiting another instant, we piled into the room.

“Minori-san!”

Yes, she was there. The room was barren. Minori-san was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, her hands and feet bound. She must have been just clinging to consciousness, because when we came in, I could see her eyes widen slightly behind her glasses.

Thank goodness. At least she was safe.

"Sh—Shinichi-kun? And Myusel and Elvia... Your Majesty, even you...!"

"Minori-sama, are yoo oh-kay?!" Myusel rushed over to Minori-san and started working on her bindings, but they were tied tight and wouldn't come loose.

"You let me! Let me!" Elvia said. She gave Myusel a little push to the side and grabbed the ropes... "Hrrrrrnnnggg!"

"Hey... Elvia?"

Was she trying to just tear them in two? No way, that wasn't possible, no matter how strong you were. Not with today's nylon ropes and such.

"Elvia, you don't have to—ouch, that hurts!" Minori-san shouted.

"Ahh, I've got it, don't worry," Reito-san said. He produced a folding knife from his pocket and started systematically cutting through the ropes.

"Hmph!" Elvia snorted, but Minori-san was free shortly after. "Here!" She and Reito-san sliced through the rope around Minori-san's legs, and soon enough she was free.

"Thanks, Elvia," Minori-san said, massaging her wrists where they had been rubbed raw by the ropes. Myusel helped her to her feet and she looked at us again. "But why are you all here...?"

"Ress-cue!" Elvia said emphatically.

"*Ress-cue*...? You came to save me?" Minori-san almost sounded more exasperated than surprised. "I can't believe you found me here."

"My mom and Reito-san did all the work."

"Reito...?" She looked at me, puzzled, and then at Reito-san, who was standing a step away from our joyous reunion, scanning the room alertly. Minori-san herself looked ever so slightly suspicious of him.

"Oh, uh, Reito-san is an agent from the government, or I guess CIRO, who's here to protect us..."

"CIRO?" Minori-san raised an eyebrow.

"Well, more of a subcontractor, technically," Reito-san laughed.

Incidentally, the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office was one of

Japan's intelligence agencies. Strictly speaking, it's a division of the Cabinet Secretariat. In Japanese, it's sometimes known as *naichou* ("CabInt") or CIRO for short. It was originally established with the aim of being a Japanese CIA, but unfavorable public opinion and other criticism seems to have kept it from doing much in the way of gathering HUMINT.

"Just like your zombie unit, they want to be able to cut me loose anytime they need to. On paper, I'm not an official employee of CabInt. But let's save the org chart for later. We need to get out of here." Reito-san had his gun in his hand and was looking down the hall. "Tell me, Minori-san, how many agents are there in total?"

"I've confirmed nine."

We had taken out one outside, two guards, and four reinforcements: seven in total. That meant there should be two more...

"Two of them were here until just a moment ago," Minori-san said, pointing to a desk in the corner. A laptop sat open on top of it. "They were working on something on that computer. They looked pretty upset. Then they ran out of here."

"'A bird that takes flight leaves no tracks,' huh?" Reito-san said, quoting a Japanese proverb. "That computer must be hooked up to the security camera network. When they saw their friends eating it, they wiped the most damning information and ran for it."

"Oh... Makes sense," I said.

Security camera tricks were hardly the sole domain of the Kanou household. You could tell these guys were professionals in part because they didn't get obsessed with taking revenge for their comrades or something—when they saw the tide had turned against them, they just beat feet.

The upshot was that all our opponents were either unconscious or gone. There were no guarantees that those first casualties wouldn't be waking up soon, though, so we didn't have time for a lengthy reunion here.

"Minori-san, can you walk?"

"I'm a little tingly, but I can do it."

A quick glance at Minori-san didn't reveal any obvious injuries. Her clothes weren't even too rumpled. They really had just tied her up. Then again, it hadn't even been a full day since she'd been kidnapped, so maybe whatever they had been planning to do to her, they had been planning to do

it later... Hmm.

"They didn't... torture you or anything, did they?" I asked as we piled out into the hallway.

"Why do you look so disappointed about that?"

"I—I'm not disappointed. But they didn't, like, beat you or tear off your clothes or anything?"

"Not once. They did drag me here and tie me up, though." Minori-san shrugged. "I tried not to give them too much trouble. There was no way I was going to beat that many people."

Minori-san might have been an accomplished martial artist, but even she couldn't hope to overcome five or six grown men all likewise trained in combat. Invincible heroes who can single-handedly take down dozens of enemies without breaking a sweat are the stuff of games and manga.

But I had another question in mind. "Was it just that there were too many of them to fight? It wasn't because they had two hot guys and you couldn't bring yourself to run away?"

"What *are* you talking about?" Minori-san said.

Hmm. I guess my dream had been completely off. I was surprised to realize the Russian intelligence agency was apparently operating by the seat of its pants, not doing its homework. If I had been in their shoes, I would definitely have checked out Minori-san's proclivities ahead of time so I could use them to make her talk.

Of course, if they had wandered into yaoi territory, all the Russian agents might have ended up brainwashed by Minori-san...

"...Shinichi, you do seem most unpleased," Petralka said, glancing at me.

"Huh? N-No, I am not like that," I said.

"Hoh?" Her eyes were cold. Minori-san seemed to be glaring at me too for some reason. She even had her arms crossed over her chest, as if she was hiding it from me.

"W-Wait! You don't think I'm the kind of guy who would picture you in *that* sort of situation?!"

"I think I know you all too well, Shinichi..." Minori-san said, looking at me suspiciously.

Well, to be fair, I *had* thought about it.

"All right, come on," Reito-san said. "We have to hurry."

We exchanged small smiles—and then we all left the building. Just then...

“Shinichi-kun.” Minori-san came up close to me and whispered in my ear. I naturally slowed my pace, and she slowed down to walk beside me. “Don’t do something this foolish again—I’m serious. You *know* that if anything happens to Her Majesty, it’ll be a way bigger deal than one human life.”

“...Yeah.” Boy, did I ever know.

“But... thanks,” Minori-san went on. “Your big sis is actually sort of impressed.” She sounded almost... shy.

Aaahhhh?! How can she be older than me and still so dang cute?!

From Minori-san’s perspective, did I maybe, just maybe, look like a prince on a white horse (exaggeration)?!

Had the age of big boobs and glasses really come?! Had my dad been right?!

And so on and so forth...

“Shinichi! What are you doing?!”

Petralka, who was well ahead of me by now, must have sensed my inner moe turmoil, because she called out to me with thorns in her voice.

“S-Sorry!” I said. Then Minori-san and I looked at each other, and raced to catch up with the others.

Chapter Three: The Going Is Easy, but the Coming Home...

It was the day after we had rescued Minori-san. A microbus and two black sedans were parked in front of my house. Strictly speaking, there was nothing special about them, but they must have given off a certain vibe, because we could see people turning and staring as they walked by.

The three vehicles had been provided by the Japanese government to get us back to Eldant. Me and the girls would ride in the microbus, while our escort went in the sedans.

"You look practically normal like this," I said. I was standing just outside the front door, talking to a man in a black suit who was standing beside one of the sedans.

"'Normal,' sure!" Reito-san said with a wry grin. The stereotypical otaku gear he'd been wearing until the day before—the black shirt, the fingerless gloves—were gone, replaced with a black suit, perfectly fitted and without a wrinkle in sight. He looked like a real, productive member of society. Okay, so his hair was still a little long, but he had it tied back by his collar. I guess clothes really do make the man.

"The way you dressed and acted right up until yesterday—I guess that was to get us to let our guards down?"

If Reito-san had shown up in Akihabara looking the way he did now, I would never have trusted him. It was the way we seemed to be fellow otaku that had helped me accept him, even if our meeting did seem a little convenient. It was pretty incredible that it was all part of his plan.

"Nah, those are my civvies."

"Huh?!"

"And that's my personal car."

He sounded practically proud. *His personal car?* To be fair, I wouldn't have known what to make of it if he'd said that itasha was government property.

“You don’t get to have a lot of fun in this line of work,” Reito-san added.

“Oh, is that it?”

Then again, Minori-san was an otaku, too; a fujoshi at that. Maybe it made a certain kind of sense. Come to think of it, I had heard that the JSDF, and the US Army stationed in Japan, had uncommonly high percentage of otaku. I wondered if it was true.

Minori-san came out of the house a moment after I did. “Are all the bodyguards here now?” She was followed by Petralka, then Elvia.

So our party consisted of those of us going back to Eldant, Reito-san, two guys for each of the black sedans, and a driver for the bus. I gathered they were mostly CIRO people, although Reito-san told me they were subcontractors—“outsourcing,” he called it.

CIRO, by the way, is sort of a public security or police organization. Traditionally, they haven’t gotten along very well with the JSDF—territorial disputes or something. Which might explain why they’d been sent to take care of us, considering what we had done to the JSDF intelligence guys.

“This is about as many people as you can have and still keep a low profile. You have to be able to make excuses for why everyone’s here,” Reito-san said with a shrug.

“Where’s Myusel...?” I didn’t know what she was doing, but she hadn’t come out of the house yet. I didn’t want to keep Reito-san and the others waiting. I was just thinking maybe I should go get her when she, my parents, and Shizuki all came out the front door.

“I am sorry for making you wait.”

“What were you doing?”

“We were talking about... the various things.”

For some reason, her voice almost trailed off as she answered, and she blushed a little.

Huh...? What’s with this reaction? It’s super-duper cute.

“Shinichi.”

I was just about to get on the microbus when someone stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. It was my dad. My mom and Shizuki were there with him. Myusel and the others glanced back at me, but Minori-san urged them onto the bus.

“Y-Yeah, what?”

“You take good care of that Myusel-san of yours, all right?”

“Say what? That’s kind of out of the blue.”

“She really is a good girl,” my mom chipped in. “She helped out so much at dinner. And she has so many kind things to say about you, for whatever reason.”

“Hey, I’m your son, remember,” I said with a frown.

Well... okay. So being shot down by my old friend had led to me totally ditching school, until I suddenly disappeared one day—maybe I deserved “for whatever reason.” But still... Myusel had said nice things about me? What in the world could that mean?

“...What exactly did Myusel say?”

I had to admit I was a bit embarrassed to ask. My parents, though, just grinned sly grins.

“Oh, this and that. Like how you’re so cool, you’re so reliable.”

“How you’re totally indispensable to all of them.”

“G-Gosh, really?”

Yikes! I was happy but also kind of freaked. Embarrassing!

“You’re a good enough son, Shinichi, but for her to be so keen on you... I have to question her taste in men.”

“Just what do you mean by that?”

Geez, seriously—what a way for a mother to talk to her long-lost little boy!

That was when something occurred to me. I was on my way “home” to Eldant, but I had no idea when I would be coming back to *this* home again. Six months? A year? Longer?

“When will you come home again?” a blunt voice asked, as if its owner was reading my mind. It was Shizuki.

“Well, I...”

I was lost for words. I hadn’t even really planned to come back this time; it had only happened because I was worried about our dad. It had spiraled from there into an international game of spy-vs-spy. And it put me on notice that for better or for worse, I wouldn’t be able to just duck back to Japan any time I felt like it.

As I stood there, trying anxiously to figure out what to say, my dad spoke up instead. “I’ll bet Shinichi can’t just waltz back here so easily. He’s

an... otaku evangelist now. A goodwill ambassador, if you will."

"I'm so glad you've found your calling," my mom said. "Out of the curse of your blood." She smiled.

Well, no question I was the full-throttle otaku that I was because I had happened to be born to these parents. Was it a blessing, or a curse? I guess that depended who you asked. Whatever it was, Shizuki seemed to have escaped it completely.

"I guess it's because you saw your mom and dad spend their lives doing what they love. All I'll say is, do what you have to do so that you don't regret anything. And... drop us a letter or an email sometimes, just to let us know how things are going. It'd be good for your old dad's heart."

"Even if it does seem a little early for you to be leaving the nest..."

The sight of my parents' smiles left me speechless.

Yikes! I was on the verge of choking up, here. Suddenly embarrassed, I looked away from my mom and dad—

"Gotta say, though, it's fine by us if you never come home again," my dad said.

"I-Isn't that a little harsh?"

"He's right—you have a job, you're living on your own. Obviously, the next time we see you will be when you bring your fiancée to meet us."

"What?"

As I fought back panic, my dad leaned in and whispered: "Wherever your Princess Petralka comes from... is polygamy allowed there?"

That's *what you're worried about?!*

I tried to find the words to react, but before I could—

"Come on now, everyone's waiting for you. Hurry up and go."

"You're the ones who stopped me!"

My parents urged me toward the microbus; it felt a bit like I was being gotten rid of. In the bus, Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, and Minori-san were all sitting and waiting patiently for me. The rows in the bus were arranged with two seats, then the aisle, then another seat, for a total of three in each row. There were seven rows in the bus. Myusel and Petralka sat in one pair of seats, with Elvia in the one across the aisle. I took the open place next to Minori-san behind Myusel and Petralka. The driver made sure we were all on board, then started the engine.

Minori-san opened the window and poked her head out. "Sorry it was so

sudden. Thanks a lot for having us!”

Everyone got out of their seats and went over to the side Minori-san was on, sticking their heads out the windows like she was doing.

“We thank you for your show of the hospitality.”

“It was very fun!”

“Thank you very much. Please, be well.”

“Our pleasure!”

“Take care of Shinichi for us.”

Finally, I squeezed up next to Minori-san, leaned out the window, and waved. “See you guys!”

“Big brother—!” Shizuki, who had been sort of hiding in our parents’ shadows until that moment, ran up to the bus. “Take... Take care, okay?”

She was stone-faced, her words the very definition of decorum. But coming from my little sister, whom I had hardly spoken to in years, they sounded different. More meaningful.

“Thanks. You too, Shizuki.” I smiled and nodded—and at that exact moment, the bus pulled away. Flanked by the two sedans, it started rolling slowly, then picked up speed. My family, standing in front of the house, quickly got smaller, and then we turned a corner and I couldn’t see them anymore.

I shifted in my seat and sighed. Minori-san gave me a mischievous smile. “Feeling lonely already, Shinichi-kun?”

“Oh... Maybe, maybe not,” I said evasively, but then I had a thought. If I remembered correctly, Minori-san didn’t have any family. She could come back to Japan, but she couldn’t go back home, and she didn’t have any parents or siblings to share any tearful farewells with. That made me feel a little bad about how I had answered, but maybe trying to backpedal now would be just as rude. In the end, I decided just to be honest. “It would be a lie to say I’m not sad about it...” But I had something bigger on my mind. “Right now, what I mostly feel is, ‘Phew, I can finally go home.’”

Home to my mansion in Eldant. Home to the house where Brooke and Cerise, and even Hikaru-san, were no doubt waiting anxiously for me.

“I see,” Minori-san said with a smile and a nod.

“I am glad I got to see my family, though,” I said. Then I thought about the way Shizuki had looked as we left, and added, “I even found out that my little sister doesn’t actually hate me or anything.”

Or maybe she had, back before I went to Eldant. But at least, with everything that had happened here, I was able to reconcile with her. I was glad for that. I’m not going to act like I brought our family back together again or did any big-deal stuff like that, but there’s nothing better than siblings who get along.

“Good, good,” Minori-san said.

“We are glad, Shinichi, that we could to meet your father, your mother, and your little sister!” Petralka said, turning around and looking at me over the back of the seat.

“Me, too... I am glad that I got to see the side of you I didn’t know, Master.”

“*Yakiniku*. Very gud.”

Uh, Elvia? One of these statements is not like the others...

It seemed, though, like soy sauce and similar ingredients worked just fine for people from the other world. Maybe I could start importing

Japanese sauces, and we could have a yakiniku party over there sometime.

In any event, with all that had happened, it still seemed like everyone had enjoyed themselves in Japan. As far as I was concerned, that was justification enough for having come home.

Now all we had to do was... go home.

We headed for Fuji's Sea of Trees. The hyperspace wormhole waited for us there, and beyond it, Eldant.

The bus ride back turned into the occasion for a reflective discussion about what had happened. Or maybe I should say an *appreciative* discussion—it wasn't like we had screwed up or done anything really wrong. It was just a way of passing the time as we covered the considerable distance from my house to the JSDF base in the forest near Mount Fuji. After all, we had already discovered what happened when we tried to play car games or read books on the way over.

Petralka started us off with some real praise: "This was a most enlightening journey!"

We had released some sprites inside the bus so our translator rings could work as normal. That was great for us and our conversation, but the bus driver probably wondered what in the world was going on. All he would hear would be Petralka and the others speaking Eldant, and me and Minori-san answering in Japanese. But anyway...

"Especially this!" Petralka said—and held up the little gacha**n figure she'd gotten in Akihabara. "Look at this Foreman! It's so small, but the sculpting is so fine! Think—it's made of a material that neither rusts nor rots, yet it's cheap enough for even commoners to afford! We must share this technology with the dwarves!"

In other words, Petralka was psyched. I thought the dwarves were going to have some trouble replicating this thing, considering how hard it would be to obtain materials, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were able to produce something almost identical using metal or stone.

Incidentally, Petralka had taken to the *Gaishi* figures with a passion, shoving hundred-yen coins into the gacha**n machine as if she was going

to empty it out. I had to stop her. Her bag now contained the complete series of figurines, but only because we had bought about half of them at a specialty shop later on. It almost had to be a better use of money.

"Well, if you're happy, I'm happy," I said.

"Akihabara is a far more mysterious town than we expected, though."

"How so?"

"We never imagined walls such as those would be constructed to protect your otaku goods from the Titans..."

"Come again?"

"Isn't that what that spicy food is for? To fire up the morale of soldiers about to do battle against the giants? We felt the fire in our belly after we ate!"

Apparently Petralka was still under the misconception that the buildings formed some sort of protective barrier. In my mind, I toyed with an image of otaku armed with box cutters, eating curry and "wire-actioning" their way around, defending their anime and games and manga from titanic monsters, all of whom had the faces of the previous governors of Tokyo for some reason.

Hmmm.

Petralka was chatting away happily, but I didn't even know where to start setting her straight—she had gone past three-sixty; she had done a triple axel and was facing completely the opposite direction.

"Look, the point is, you're way off base," I said hesitantly.

She hardly seemed to hear me. "What did you think, Myusel?" Petralka asked instead, her eyes shining.

"Wha?"

"About Akiba! Did you enjoy it as well?"

"Yes," Myusel said, smiling. "It was so much fun. It was so moving to seek not just the holy land, Akiba, but my master's home country. When I think that he was born and raised here, it just means so much to me..."

"R-Really...?" I thought of what my parents had said as we left and found myself feeling a little shy.

"I was also very happy to meet your honored parents, Master, and your honored younger sister. I'm merely a servant, yet they treated me like an important guest and were so kind to me."

"Well, as far as that goes—that's just Japan."

I thought back to when I had first arrived in Eldant, when I had scolded Petralka for yelling at Myusel, telling her that in my own country, there were no differences of class or status. Obviously, my parents understood that Petralka was some kind of important figure, and I think they went out of their way to be nice to her—but they definitely didn't look down on Myusel or Elvia, who were there as servants.

I didn't think it was just because my parents were that way, either. In Japanese society, we definitely recognized people of higher status, but we didn't really have people of lower status to speak of. There was the Imperial family, and then there was everyone else. Sure, some people were richer than others, or better at certain things, or even just prettier, but that was all fluid and ambiguous. Differences in social status as such didn't mean much in Japan.

I didn't think that was a bad thing. It made me grateful that I had been born in Japan (although getting to be an otaku didn't hurt, either). I won't say it couldn't have happened anywhere else, but the good-hearted, peaceful environment of my archipelago helped make me who I was.

Anyway...

"And I was able to meet some of your Japanese maids."

"...Huh?"

"The ones in Akiba."

"No, listen, those were—"

"They were maids just like me, but in the style of my master's nation... It helped me understand what maids are like here. I can use that knowledge to serve you better after we get back to Eldant."

"I'm telling you, they weren't real." Myusel was harboring some sort of delusion, too. I had tried to tell her that the cosplay maids weren't for real, but Myusel seemed to have taken me to mean that they were apprentices of some kind. I knew she always put the best possible spin on what other people were doing, but still... "It's just a part-time gig for them. You don't have to act like them."

"*Partime gyg*?"

"If anything, I think the maids in Akiba could learn something from *you*, Myusel."

"O-Oh..."

For a real maid to try to pick up tips from the cosplayers at a café...

There was backwards, and then there was backwards.

"Elvia, what about you?"

"I loved it!" the beast girl exclaimed, smiling from ear to ear. "I got to see all kinds of interesting things, and the food was great! I definitely wanna come back!"

"Er... Yeah, sure." I privately wondered when or if there would be a chance to come back, but I decided to spare Elvia my concerns for the time being. "Next time I'd love to take you other places, not just Akiba."

Despite all the kidnapping, being attacked by foreign spies, and on and on, it seemed like everyone had enjoyed Japan. Granted, maybe they had ended up seeing a pretty twisted side of it... But still, as a Japanese person, I couldn't help feeling happy—maybe even a little flattered, to hear Elvia say she wanted to come back.

"We wish to go to—you know! Your I-ke-bu-ku-ro's *otome* road!"

"Geez, of all the places. I think Minori-san could tell you more about Otome Road than I could."

"You can count on me, Your Majesty." Minori-san pushed her glasses up with her middle finger, a bit of a grin on her face. A beam of sunlight just happened to come through the window, flashing off her glasses and hiding her eyes.

"Oh, I wanna go to Nip-pori."

Nip-pori? Did she mean Nippori Station?

"Why?" I asked. Otome Road I could understand. Or if she had said she wanted to see the big Gun**m at Odaiba, or go to Comiket, or Nakano Broadway, any of those would have made sense. But what was there at Nippori?

"Nippori has 'fairies,' doesn't it? I want to see them."

"Fairies...?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. There was a certain "rat kingdom" in Urayasu City in Chiba, the Ghi*li Museum in Mitaka, and the trendy Kichijouji District.

"There's a forest of fairies!"

I thought about that for a few seconds.

"Wait—no, there isn't!" I exclaimed when I finally figured out what Elvia was talking about. "You misheard!"

"So Japan does have sprites in it?" Myusel asked.

“No! No, it doesn’t!”

Yes, “fairy forest” was a current expression in Japanese. But I didn’t think it meant what they thought it meant! Who even came up with that tag for mashups of “Aniki” video clips?! And I’ve heard “fairies” was originally a pejorative term for people who are, you know, *that way*! If an innocent girl watched those videos without knowing what she was getting into, she’d be traumatized!

“It was Minori-san, wasn’t it? She had to be the one who told you about that! That sort of thing is practically her specialty!”

“How rude. You don’t have to assume it was my doing just because BL was involved.”

“So it wasn’t you?”

“.....Well, yes, it was.”

She admitted it!

“But Shinichi-kun, I wish you wouldn’t lump Aniki in with BL.” She arched an eyebrow the slightest bit. “BL is fantasy! Aniki is the ‘fairy forest’! It’s an important distinction!”

“Well, I’m afraid I don’t understand, ‘Sensei’!”

And I don’t want to!

Just as I was registering with terror the true depths of the Way of Fujoshi —or was that just the depths of its depravity?—the microbus came to an abrupt stop.

“Erk!”

“Eek!”

The screeching of tires combined with our shouting. Everyone was thrown forward, seatbelts digging into our bodies. At least they kept us from being flung out of our seats.

“What in the world?” Petralka demanded.

“M-Maybe there was a cat crossing the street or something?” I said, unable to imagine why we might have stopped so suddenly. I leaned forward to have a look. A trailer truck driving in front of our bus had apparently stopped, with no stoplight or anything. “Wonder if there was an accident.”

Minori-san leaned out of her seat and asked the driver, “What’s going on?”

“Don’t know... He just suddenly...” The driver sounded as surprised as

we were.

Come to think of it, what had happened to the sedans that were supposed to be running escort for us? I thought they had been keeping pretty close—had this truck forced its way in between us?

I heard some angry reactions from behind us. I looked back to see the sedan Reito-san was riding in stopped cold, and a line of cars forming behind him. Everyone behind our escort was honking.

In a word, it had all started when that truck stopped. Annoying, sure, but maybe he'd had an accident or something.

How naïve of me.

"...Huh?"

Just as I was considering the possible explanations, the truck's trailer doors opened from the inside.

From the inside? How could a cargo container do that?

That had to mean...

I gasped.

About ten men piled out of the trailer. I suspected none of them were Japanese. There were several Asian faces mixed into the lot, but mostly they were either black or white. And they were all dressed the same: camouflage suits, simple body armor, and M4A1 carbines.

M4A1... The American military?!

The men moved quickly to surround our bus. I could see people in the opposite lane looking shocked by the bizarre scene as they went driving by. Maybe they thought we were filming a movie or something. As the soldiers fanned out around the bus, they held something up. It was a plastic sign that read in Japanese and English, *Step out of the vehicle and follow our orders*.

"I can't believe it," Minori-san groaned. "They're doing this here?"

We were outside the city proper, but we were still on a public highway, where there was lots of traffic. That meant lots of witnesses, which meant covering up or explaining away this incident would take a lot of time and work. Apparently America thought capturing us was worth it.

Silently, I looked back. Reito-san and the others had climbed out of their sedans, but they kept their distance from our bus. The soldiers probably gave them no choice. They might be our bodyguards, but it was just a few of them—lightly armed—against almost a dozen guys with military equipment. Our escorts could hardly hope to face down assault rifles with

nothing more than some handguns.

But I called out, “Myusel!” At the same moment, I undid my seatbelt and grabbed several of our sprite bottles from a bag. Myusel turned when she heard my voice, and the moment she saw what I had in my hands, she understood what I was doing.

“Yes, sir!” She unlatched her seatbelt, too, turning around in her seat and supporting herself on her knees.

Minori-san opened a window for me—she must have figured it out, too—and I leaned past her, reaching out the window. Elvia opened a window for Myusel, who leaned out the other side from me with a sprite bottle in hand.

When we were both in position, I flung a few sprite bottles outside.

There was a *crack* of shattering ceramics, and at almost the same instant—

“Tifu Murottsu!”

Myusel and I both intoned our spell. The magic turned into a pair of massive tornadoes; the army guys surrounding the bus were flung into the air. They didn’t get that high, but it did shove them backwards quite a ways, even sending some of them into the oncoming traffic. I heard honking and screeching brakes.

Perfect, and now—

“Again—Tifu Murottsu!”

Our second blast of magic hit the tractor trailer stopped in front of us, smacking it square in the behind. The tires seemed to be puncture-proof, but the force of the spell was so great it bent the axle itself. The tire came clear off the wheel, leaving the truck resting at a crazy angle.

“Now!” I shouted at our driver.

Neither the US army guys nor the truck looked like they were going to move anytime soon. Thankfully, the driver seemed to grasp what I was shouting about, and put the pedal to the metal. We made a violent move onto the shoulder of the highway, just squeezing past the semi trailer. The tires squealed as they tried to cling to the road, and Myusel and I, who had had to undo our seatbelts to lean out the windows, found ourselves badly shaken. Minori-san grabbed me by the collar just before I got tossed out into the street, Elvia rescuing Myusel the same way.

“You okay?”

“Y-Yeah, I think so...” I resumed my seat behind Petralka. I glanced over at Myusel, who was bowing her head repeatedly to Elvia. “Where are Reito-san and the others?” I looked back to find that the sedans were keeping right up with our bus. “Ah...”

I saw the car that had been running in front flipped over on the side of the road. It must have been hit by the truck trailer. A direct blow from something so much bigger and heavier could only have one outcome.

“Go! Just forget about the car!” one of the bodyguards in the sedan behind us shouted. He wasn’t shouting to me so much as to the bus driver and Reito-san. But could we really just leave them there?

It happened in that instant of hesitation: there was a roar, and an impact slammed me in the back.

“Wh—What the?!”

I looked back, and the first thing I saw was fire. And in the center of it, burning like the wick of a candle, the blackened trailer rocking back and forth.

It was the trailer. The trailer was what had caught fire. The roar must have been an explosion. But...

“Why?!”

Had I done this?! But I had just fired off some wind magic, nothing that would make the trailer explode... unless maybe we had ruptured the fuel tanks, and the gasoline had spilled out and caught on fire...?

But come on—how could a truck even blow up so easily?!

“Heeek...”

Was this really our fault? Yes, we had been trying to get away, but it would still be awful to have involved innocent people.

“Don’t worry about it.”

The remark came from Minori-san.

“But... But...”

How could I not worry about it? It was in the middle of the street, so I wasn’t afraid of the fire spreading, but what if someone had been hurt or killed in that blast...? It looked as if the flames and the burned-out trailer between them had completely blocked the highway. I didn’t think any cars were going to be following us after this.

“We don’t know why it exploded, but most soldiers are tough customers. They wouldn’t want to be captured. Put it out of your mind.” As she talked,

Minori-san drew her handgun. It looked like the 9mm she always used, but it was subtly different. Her weapon had been confiscated by the Russian agents; this was a Sig Sauer P228 Reito-san had loaned her just before we got on the bus. Her usual sidearm was actually a Sig Sauer P220, so the P228, a variation on it, would be easy for her to get used to.

But anyway...

“To think the Americans would show up at the last minute...” Minori-san murmured.

The relaxed, cheerful mood inside the bus was gone. It was replaced with confusion and fear.

The bus ran along under a heavy silence. We didn’t talk.

Myusel was looking at the ground, and Petralka wore a stiff expression. Elvia was equally downcast and silent. Minori-san kept her gun in her hand and stared out the window, probably in case there was another attack.

The mood kept me from talking to anyone. I could only watch the scenery roll by. All I could see was the gray asphalt of the road, and the concrete-reinforced hills to either side. If I looked up, I could spot the green of trees and grass, but I felt despondent, like we were running through a valley of ash.

The only cars on the road were our microbus and the sedan immediately behind us. I didn’t even see anyone in the oncoming lane... Wait.

Wasn’t that strange?

I could understand why there weren’t any cars behind us; the remains of the semi trailer were probably still blocking the road. But why wouldn’t there be a single vehicle going the other direction?!

“Minori-san, don’t you think something’s wrong here?”

“So you noticed it too, Shinichi-kun?” Minori-san said, her face grave. Apparently she had picked up on the same thing I had. Well, that made sense.

“Is there some thing the matter?” Myusel asked when she saw our faces. At the moment, incidentally, there was no magic inside the bus, in the name of conserving our supply of sprite bottles. Hence Myusel and the others had

to communicate in their halting Japanese.

“There are hardly any other cars,” I said, looking back out at the road.

Seriously: other than us, there was no one at all. It was noon on a weekday; it was impossible that we wouldn’t be passing other vehicles.

It was like... It was like everyone but us had been stopped somehow. Just coincidence? Or was this deliberate?

I shifted in my seat, pulling my phone out of my pocket. Maybe a quick check of the news online would show something...

“I’m not seeing anything special...”

No reports of unusual traffic situations. I opened Twitter. The credibility of anything there might be questionable, but events often made it to Twitter before they hit the official news channels. Maybe I would find something useful. I tried a search, and...

“Hm...?”

...found myself on an aggregator blog.

I started scanning the articles. “Find anything?” Minori-san asked.

“...Looks like there have been accidents here and there,” I said.

A lot of car accidents were happening. Other aggregator sites were also popping up bunches of reports of traffic accidents. Pretty soon, I got a news digest email saying something similar. The incident with the US Army truck was being reported as an accidental explosion. Not that the US Army was actually mentioned in the articles.

And all these accidents...

I groaned softly. I pulled up a map just to check, but there was no mistake: they were all happening on the road we were running along right now.

“I... I don’t want to believe it, but...” I said mournfully.

Could it be that even the exploding truck had been planted? That it had all been an act, the perfect way to “just happen” to block off an entire highway?

“The US Army... Just to catch us, they might be sealing off the entire area to keep bystanders away... These accidents... They aren’t accidental at all...”

Surely I was overthinking it—wasn’t I? I waited for Minori-san to say something, like “Even they wouldn’t go that far.” But she just grimaced and didn’t answer at all.

Instead, fiddling with her own phone, she asked the driver, “I’m sorry, but could you put on the radio? We need traffic information, anything about accidents—”

Then she stopped right in the middle of her sentence.

The only sound that came out of the radio when the driver turned it on was white noise. It wasn’t that we couldn’t find a station. These digital car stereos were supposed to find a channel automatically. If all we were getting was senseless noise, it meant either every radio station in the vicinity had simultaneously stopped broadcasting, or...

“...They’ve got us,” Minori-san said grimly after a moment.

“Oops... There goes our internet connection,” I said, watching as my phone disconnected from the web. There was something wrong with the signal. The little antenna symbol on the screen showed no bars at all.

“All signals are being blocked,” Minori-san said.

“You’re kidding...”

“We can’t communicate with the outside world. You were exactly right, Shinichi-kun.” Minori-san sounded absolutely desolate.

No phone. No internet. And no residential houses anywhere in sight. We were completely alone, without even a way to summon help. Not that I could imagine the police or the JSDF waltzing in to help us, considering that we were supposed to be a state secret to begin with. Even Reito-san had said something about the number of people you could trust to keep things confidential.

At any rate, this meant that now the US Army could go ahead and attack us without attracting general attention. Presumably, it would involve heavy equipment that made the soldiers earlier look like child’s play. I’m not saying there were going to be tanks, but maybe armored vehicles or attack helicopters—things our magic would be virtually helpless against.

“Is—Is okay?” Elvia asked anxiously when she saw our pale faces.

I was desperate to reassure her, but the truth was, there was virtually nothing that was okay about our situation.

“There’s a JSDF training facility right near the Sea of Trees,” Minori-san said. “If we could link up with the unit there, we might just be able to...” She looked around at me, Minori-san, Petralka, and Elvia.

It would have been even simpler if we could get the JSDF to come get us, but if the armed forces were too obvious, it might cause an outcry

among a certain group of people who didn't even feel the JSDF should exist in the first place.

And so...

"We have to keep going," Minori-san said, "and fast."

She was right: it was our only choice.

After that, all any of us did was look out the windows, our faces drawn. The one thought on our minds was that we wanted to get to our destination absolutely as fast as possible. We all stared outside less out of vigilance than from a sense that maybe the harder we looked, the sooner the Sea of Trees would appear.

How much farther do we have to go?

With no other cars on the road, the drive went very smoothly... too smoothly. I thought about telling the driver to go as fast as the bus was able, but if something sniped us while we were running hundreds of kilometers per hour, at the absolute limit, we would have nowhere to go. The bus might flip over, might even explode.

"...*Come on*..."

I was desperate to make it all the way to Mount Fuji without anything happening. But then—

"There they are!" Minori-san shouted, her voice agonizingly loud in the tense atmosphere of the bus.

"Where...?!" I looked around, but all I could see was the idyllic scenery.

Then I raised my eyes slightly, following her gaze—and I saw something out of my wildest nightmares. A brutalist lump of gray steel was going right over our heads with a roar.

A military helicopter. A CH-53D Sea Stallion, unless I missed my guess. I seemed to remember them being in the news about ten years before, when one belonging to the US Army in Japan had crashed.

Unlike anti-tank vehicles and other attack helicopters, CH-53Ds didn't have any rocket launchers or machine guns or other obviously nasty weaponry. But these vehicles, used for personnel transport, were capable of carrying dozens of fully armed soldiers, and probably mounted at least a

0.50-cal machine gun to help back them up. “Backup” might not sound so bad, but it would only take one of those 12.7mm slugs to put a human being out of commission for good. Bulletproof glass? In the face of a military weapon designed to contend with armored vehicles and aircraft, our windows might as well have been made of tissue paper.

“Minori-san—” I turned to the WAC beside me. “Tell me there’s no way the Japanese government hasn’t noticed this!”

“They probably have. Considering there’s even a communications blackout and everything.” Minori-san was checking that she had an extra clip for her P228. The usual softness had gone out of her tone, telling me just how bad things had gotten.

“Okay, so that means the JSDF should be on its way, right?”

“I don’t think so,” Minori-san whispered, looking distraught. “You know perfectly well what would happen if the Self-Defense Force got in a fight with the US Army, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

Japan and America were allies and friends, at least on paper. That meant our armed forces were supposed to be friendly with each other, too. Sure, the JSDF was sometimes criticized as not being aggressive enough toward foreign incursions into Japanese waters or airspace, but when that incursion came from a nominal ally, things got a lot more complicated very fast. It was hardly even a question of what Japan’s rights to “self-defense” were anymore.

Short version: if we were going to get out of this, we were going to have to do it ourselves.

Our microbus picked up speed.

Automobile versus helicopter: it was all too obvious which one was going to win in a race. I guess our driver just couldn’t stand the idea of simply stopping the bus without trying anything.

But then—

“Whoa!”

The bus decelerated violently, as if the Sea Stallion had landed right on top of it and was pressing it into the ground. The driver turned the wheel hard from right to left, trying to wriggle out from under the chopper, but it wasn’t going to solve our problem.

“We d-dob’t beel so good...” Petralka had gone pale, unable to endure

the bus's rocking. She was hugging her bag of anime merchandise tightly, fighting nausea.

"*Itosejamu, donimu irerasu...*" *Majesty, stay strong...* Myusel rubbed Petralka's back encouragingly.

"Sorry, Petralka," I said. She was just going to have to deal with it for the time being. We couldn't stop. We couldn't even slow down.

That was when I noticed the wall in the road up ahead.

No... Not a wall. A semi trailer. A big semi truck, like the one we'd blown up earlier, sitting sideways across the street.

Crap. They really had us.

We couldn't turn back, and we couldn't shake the helicopter. There were no other cars around, meaning no witnesses, meaning the army could do whatever they wanted with us.

What they wanted was to get confidential information, so it seemed unlikely that they would kill us immediately, but...

Is this because we beat up their other agents and ran away?

We had used magic and Elvia's physical strength to overcome the first American agents who had tried to kidnap us in Akihabara. Maybe that led them to think Japan *really* had something big to hide, and convinced them to use force to get at us if necessary.

"Shinichi-sama, Minori-sama! That...!" Elvia was shouting and pointing behind us.

We turned around to see Reito-san's car, apparently out of control, doing a huge flip. The hood had a massive dent in it, probably down to the engine—had it taken a hit from the helicopter's machine gun?!

As we watched, speechless, Reito-san's sedan ended up upside down on the shoulder of the road. It didn't actually explode, but it didn't look like they were going to be driving it anywhere, either.

"Reito-san!" I shouted, unable to restrain myself—but thankfully, it looked like the people in the car were safe. I saw Reito-san and the others crawl out through a window. There were no obvious injuries.

As for our bus, it slowed down—and then stopped.

The semi blocking the road was right in front of us. We had to stop, or we would have run smack into the huge, metal trailer that sat there like a wall.

"What do we do...?" I whispered, frantic.

My brain could hardly keep up with the situation. Seriously, what *could* we do? How could we get out of this?

Myusel and Elvia looked just as vacant as I felt. Even Petralka, who had been feeling so poorly a few minutes before, had all but forgotten her nausea in the face of what we were dealing with now. Pale, she was looking at Reito-san's car.

Then I had a thought.

"Th-That's it... We can just use magic again...!"

I grabbed a sprite bottle. Myusel saw me and did the same. We had already made this work once on a similar trailer. If Myusel and I both used Tifu Murottsu at the same time, we might be able to destroy this one, too.

But wait. Maybe it wouldn't be enough. Even if we destroyed the trailer, if we couldn't get it moved out of the way, there would be no point. And I didn't know if Tifu Murottsu would have any real effect on the Sea Stallion, which could retreat higher into the sky at will.

Then I caught my breath: the door of the trailer was opening.

Almost immediately, soldiers began pouring out, just like before. So far, they had been using the exact same tactics as last time, but then—

"What are those things...?" Petralka breathed as she watched the US military encircle our bus.

All the soldiers spreading out around our vehicle wore heavy equipment. Bulky body armor, along with black-visored helmets that I associated more with the police than the military. Even Minori-san's handgun probably couldn't stop these guys.

And that meant...

"We've got to do this! Myusel!"

"Right!"

By now, Myusel knew exactly what to do. We each opened a window on opposite sides of the bus and threw out the bottles, smashing them on the pavement. We intoned our spells in unison, stuck out our hands.

Our voices overlapped: "Tifu Murottsu!"

Under the circumstances, I decided to aim not at the truck trailer, but at the soldiers getting steadily closer. Myusel's and my wind magic each scored a direct hit on three of our assailants, blowing them away. But...

"It didn't work?!"

Almost immediately, the soldiers sprang back to their feet. Apparently

the shields and body armor were more about absorbing impacts than stopping bullets. I could see some kind of mat stuck to the insides of their shields. I guess after seeing us use Tifu Murottsu on two different groups of their operatives, the Americans had started to come up with some countermeasures. They might not have identified our magic as, well, *magic*, but they didn't have to know what it was to be ready for it.

But so quickly...? I was reminded of just how terrifying a national entity could be when it really got serious.

"Tifu Murottsu!"

It didn't matter. We couldn't back down. Myusel and I released a series of Tifu Murottsu spells, knocking the soldiers down repeatedly, but each time they got back up. In fact, the more we hit them, the more they seemed to learn; they started staying close, shoulder to shoulder, moving in formation to help resist the effects of the magic.

It was hopeless. This wasn't doing anything. But we really had no other cards to play. Myusel and I grabbed more bottles, more magic stones, letting off additional Tifu Murottsus. Until...

".....Uh-oh."

I discovered we had finally run out of supplies.

"Master...!" Myusel looked at me, her face absolutely bloodless.

We had used enough sprite bottles that we might be able to continue casting Tifu Murottsu for a while yet—but we were, if you will, out of gas.

"What do we do?" I asked myself, but I wasn't getting any brilliant ideas for how to turn the tables here.

We couldn't use magic, and our guns wouldn't work. Those were all the weapons we had.

Obviously, fighting hand-to-hand was out of the question. Our opponents were armed and armored, and outnumbered us by better than ten to one. This wasn't some video game; one lone hero couldn't clear out dozens of anonymous underlings. Myusel and I didn't really know how to fight, anyway.

Things were looking hopeless.

That was when the Sea Stallion landed directly behind us. The rear hatch opened, and someone emerged...

"*Him*...!" Elvia snarled.

Amidst the crowd of heavily armored soldiers, this person stood out in

his black suit.

"What? Elvia, do you know him?" Minori-san asked.

"He's the one who captured me and Shinichi-sama!" she said hotly. Apparently there was enough magic left floating around for the rings to work.

"That was while you were with the Russian agents, Minori-san," I clarified.

Alan Smith—that was what he had called himself, anyway; it probably wasn't his real name. An American agent who had tried to abduct me, Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia in Akihabara. I guess he had come to finish what he started. Maybe he was angry that a bunch of total amateurs had escaped on him.

"Get out of the vehicle," Mr. Smith ordered us in Japanese.

Naturally, we didn't move. We couldn't.

"I don't know what's going on here, but it seems the Japanese government is hiding something—something big. Would those techniques—something akin to ESP, perhaps—be part of it?"

He was asking the questions; we had no choice but to sit in the microbus and listen. But none of us said anything. We had no reason to give him information, and Myusel and the others were especially uninterested in helping the guy who had tried to kidnap them. Plus, Mr. Smith didn't have a ring; they might not even have fully understood what he was saying.

Mr. Smith, however, just shrugged; he seemed to have expected our resolute silence.

"In any event."

As he spoke, the soldiers flanking him raised their M4A1 carbines and started shooting.

The guns didn't make that much noise; maybe they were equipped with special silencers. It was just a sort of muted *bump-bump-bump*. Then the windows of the microbus shattered into a million pieces. Reito-san had told me this glass was supposed to be bulletproof... but apparently not bulletproof enough to withstand high-penetration rounds from small rifles.

"You can walk out of there on your own feet, or we can drag you out. That's really the only choice you have," Mr. Smith said, looking at us with a thin smile. "Believe me, this ends the same either way."

"Ugh....." Minori-san groaned and bit her lip. She still had the P228 in

her hand, but she was probably thinking that one measly handgun wasn't going to do us much good in this situation. A single careless shot could get her riddled with automatic-rifle fire.

Petralka sat silently, also chewing her lip. For the most part, she appeared calm—maybe being an empress gives you a lot of practice at that—but I could see her hands shaking where they rested on her knees.

Elvia looked lost, her gaze wandering from the inside of the bus to the American military outside. She was physically the strongest of any of us—but while she might be able to at least escape on her own, she couldn't single-handedly turn the tide of this engagement. She knew all too well now what a gun could do.

"Master..."

Then there was Myusel, who was looking into my face. *What should I do?* her big purple eyes asked me. There was anxiety in them, no question, but they hadn't been completely consumed by despair—a sign, maybe, of how much she trusted me.

But as for me... I couldn't say anything. I wished someone could tell *me* what we should do.

I stood in the center aisle of the microbus and thought desperately. Was there some way to break out of here? We didn't have to dispatch the entire American military force, we just had to all escape. If we could make it to the wormhole near Mount Fuji without them catching us, we won. But...

Even if by some miracle we got away from here...

Obviously, the Army would chase us. And what would happen if we went directly to the wormhole then? Wouldn't it just give away the other world, the secret the Japanese government had been working so hard to keep? But if they captured us and forced confessions out of us, the secret would be just as blown.

If they did get us, Japan would have to either rescue us, or shut us up permanently.

And one of those things was a lot simpler than the other.

I looked from side to side, then down at the floor of the bus. Could there be a bomb hidden in the vehicle's innards? It would protect confidentiality, if nothing else. Obviously the American military wouldn't want this operation to go public, considering that they were arbitrarily undertaking illegal action in a sovereign nation. An exploding bus would help cover

their tracks.

Argh. This was awful. We really seemed completely trapped!

What to do what to do what to do?!

If only I could at least get Myusel and the others back home to Eldant... Argh, but... *how*?!

My mind circled and circled the same thoughts, but that didn't get me anything new.

"Come on, now, I'm not going to wait all day," Mr. Smith called from outside.

Crap! We were out of time! Fast! I had to do something, fast...!

"Like a bunch of disobedient children. Fine. I'll take you by the scruff of the neck and—"

Before Mr. Smith finished, I saw Myusel blink and look off in a strange direction.

"Myusel? What's wrong?"

"Oh, I—" She seemed to be looking past the semi, up into the clear, blue sky. "I heard a sound..."

"A sound...?"

Myusel, with her elven blood, had sharper senses than the rest of us—especially her hearing. If she was picking up a sound...

One of the soldiers outside pointed past the trailer and shouted something I didn't understand. We looked where he was pointing and saw —

"A helicopter? Another one?"

A helicopter was coming our way. But if it belonged to the Americans, why were the soldiers so upset? I squinted hard...

"A Huey...!" Minori-san whispered.

A Bell UH-1 Iroquois, popularly known as a Huey. A versatile military craft capable of everything from materials transport to armed attack missions, the Huey was a masterpiece of aircraft design. It's pretty much guaranteed to show up in any Vietnam War movie. It has a truly classic "helicopter" shape; it's probably what a lot of people think of when they think "military chopper."

Of course, the American military in Japan used them, too—or had, in the past. They were outdated now, so the US forces in our country were replacing their Hueys with the successor model. Still, the choppers were so accomplished that most countries still had some in service.

Like Japan, for example.

"That's—"

As we watched, the Huey hovered just overhead, and the side door opened. We could see a man inside. He was holding a long rifle with a prominent scope. A sniper rifle?

There was a noise—*ba-shoom!* —and the semi trailer rocked from side to side. There was a lot more shouting in English by the soldiers. They were talking too fast for me to catch most of what they said, but I thought I could pick out the word "sniper."

The trailer rocked several more times, and the soldiers' shouting grew more agitated. It seemed like the guy in the Huey was sniping the trailer. When I looked close, I could see the trailer's tires were deflated, punctured by sniper bullets. The Sea Stallion looked like it had tried to get away, but the Huey had positioned itself above the Stallion first, pinning it in place.

Yes: the Huey was on the attack against the American army.

"He's on our side...?"

The enemy of our enemy was not necessarily our friend. This could easily be the Chinese or the Russians trying to butt in and collect us again.

Mr. Smith shouted something. The soldiers all turn their guns on the Huey...

"Oh..."

There was a sort of *poink*, an almost disinterested sound totally at odds with the fraught atmosphere. A lump about the size of a clenched fist went falling into the street. One of the soldiers nearby shouted and threw himself to the ground.

"Grenade!"

That word, I got.

The soldier wanted everyone to know that thing was going to explode.

An instant later—the blast the soldiers and I were waiting for didn't come. Instead, there was a spray of dense, white fog that spread out and left us all but blind.

I could hear lots of confused shouting from the soldiers, along with the

occasional *pop* of gunfire. Thanks to our now-foggy world, though, it was impossible to tell exactly what was going on.

"Just what in the heck... Huh?"

I felt someone take my hand firmly, and realized Myusel had come up just beside me. She didn't understand what was going on, either, and she was worried. I squeezed her hand back, and—

"Hrk?!" That was when someone reached through the smoke and grabbed me by the collar. "Wahghghgh!"

"Eek!"

Myusel, still holding my hand, was dragged out the window of the bus along with me. Beside us I could see Petralka, Elvia, and Minori-san, as well.

"Wha...?"

I finally registered that the hand that had pulled us out of the vehicle didn't belong to one of the American soldiers. At the very least, he was wearing a different uniform, and he wasn't carrying an M4A1.

In fact, it looked like some other group had shown up in the meantime and was engaged in a firefight with the American forces. The crack of gunfire. Stumbling American troops. Their body armor kept bullet hits from being fatal, but with all the extra padding they had brought to protect against Tifu Murottsu, their movements were slow and restricted. The mysterious attackers appeared to be running circles around them.

"Where did they...?" I mumbled vacantly.

"They seem to have come from beside the highway just after the smoke grenade went off," Minori-san informed me.

"*Shitaato a doneirufu*?!" *They're our friends?!* Elvia asked.

"*Esu imene fuo esu imene yamu ton ebu a doneirufu*"—*Our enemies' enemies might not be our friends*, Petralka cautioned her.

Everything had happened so suddenly, all we could do was stand there.

"This way, run!"

The order came to us in Japanese. We saw the black-clad man who had pulled us out of the bus gesturing to us. We could only see his eyes under his headgear, so we didn't know what his face looked like, but this was about as suspicious as a person could get.

Still...

"Don't just stand there, go!"

We all glanced at each other—then shared a nod and hurried toward him. I still wasn't sure who this guy was, but his fluent, unaccented Japanese made him more likely to be an ally than an American soldier. I had one simple thought in my mind: that this almost had to be better than getting captured by the Americans.

We let the man all but drag us over toward the side of the road. We had to get down on all fours to manage the climb up the concrete-reinforced incline beside the street; we worked our way up for the better part of two meters, tumbling into a forest at the top. It made sense: the street was blocked by the semi, but you could get around it on foot if you left the road.

"That way," the man said, pointing into the trees. We started running. We stumbled and almost fell several times, but worked our way ahead, supporting each other. It felt like we had been running forever, but it probably had been hardly more than a minute. We emerged into something of a clearing. And there...

"LAVs?!"

Two squat hunks of steel were parked in the clearing.

They were LAVs, Light Armored Vehicles, used by the JSDF. And across from them was a so-called armored fighting vehicle that looked a lot like the LAVs. If I remembered right, it was what they referred to as a High-Mobility Vehicle, widely known as a Hayate.

It was designed for personnel transport—the military equivalent of our microbus, essentially. Obviously, like the LAVs, it was a hardy off-roader prepared for any terrain.

And in the middle of the group of vehicles stood soldiers holding Type 89 assault rifles.

There was no room for doubt now. The American army's attackers had been the Japan Self-Defense Force.

The black-clad man ushered us into the back of the Hayate. "We'll handle defense from here on out. Hop in and get to Mount Fuji."

The Japanese forces still at the scene must have done a good job with the holding action, because the US soldiers didn't come after us. The LAVs

and the Hayate ran through the woods for a while before getting back onto a proper road and heading for the Sea of Trees.

The man in the passenger seat glanced back at us and said, “I think we lost them.” Presumably he meant the Americans. I thought he might be the same guy who had pulled us out of the microbus, but it was hard to tell one soldier from another when all you could see was their eyes.

“So, uh...” I said. “Thanks for saving us.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m just doing my job,” he said firmly.

“Oh, that reminds me, what about Reito-san... I mean, the man from the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office?”

“Our air support confirmed that he and the others escaped the scene under their own power.”

I guess the Huey had been for more than just snipers and hand grenades. It was there to help the infantry insert and then keep an eye on them.

“Still...” the man said darkly. “Orders or no orders, I never expected to be rescuing *you*.”

“Huh...?”

It almost sounded like he knew me personally. Who was this guy?

The soldier took off the balaclava covering his face, revealing an imposing middle-aged man. His eyes were sharp, focused, like he wasn’t looking at anything except his duty. I found myself almost overwhelmed by the feeling that I was seeing someone totally committed to his job.

But even so, I just didn’t recognize him. For a second, I thought maybe it was Satou-san, the garrison commander from Eldant, but no.

I was sweating it out when the man’s expression softened into a wry smile. “Let’s just say when *I* was the one attacking you, I didn’t come off any better than those Americans.”

When he was... attacking *me? Wait... No way.*

I felt myself go stiff. Once before, when the Japanese government felt I wasn’t doing what it wanted, it had sent a JSDF special-ops unit to assassinate me. According to Matoba-san, the government had later tried to claim that the unit’s real goal had only been to “take me into custody.”

“Mass-ter?”

“Shinichi?”

Myusel and Petralka seemed to have understood enough of the conversation to catch on to who this man was. Petralka said something to

Elvia in rapid Eldant, and the wolf girl poised herself to pounce. Of course, she was still wearing her seatbelt.

"Settle down," the man said softly, looking directly at Elvia. "That mission is over. My job today is to get you all safely to the wormhole in Fuji's Sea of Trees."

"But why—?"

"Why? That's a strange question," the man said, the corners of his lips tugging upward. "Because they ordered me to. Because it's my mission. We fight for the good of this country, just like we always have. It's nothing more and nothing less than that. We leave our personal feelings out of the job—or don't we?"

These last, ironic words were aimed not at me, but at Minori-san. She just shrugged, silent.

Fair enough—from the perspective of the JSDF, this man was right. It was like—how could I put this? For better or for worse, he was a professional. Obviously, it wasn't like he was my new best friend or anything, but the unshakable confidence in his voice was bracing.

Geez... That whole thing was a seriously close call.

I thought back on the attack. With the help of the Holy Eldant Empire, we had been able to drive back the JSDF forces—but when I really thought about it, it was partly thanks to more than a little good luck. There had been a number of things stacked against the Japanese soldiers: they were in another world, something completely unprecedented; they were faced with magic and beast people and other things they had never encountered before, along with pint-sized female soldiers. If they had been ordered to make a second attempt on my life, would we have been able to repel them again? The men of Satou-san's garrison had taken out some of Garius's picked knights once, after all...

This guy was probably a member of a zombie unit like Minori-san. Officially, he was already dead. Officially, he might not even be a member of the JSDF. Maybe that was why he could engage the US forces, even if not exactly head-to-head. Considering that what the Americans were doing was blatantly illegal, they wouldn't want to make a big deal about it in public.

Anyway...

"Elvia, it's all right," I said, and she relaxed.

“We’ll reach Mount Fuji soon,” the man said. “The facility garrison is waiting for you there. Link up with them and get in the elevator.” Then he looked forward again. Over his shoulder, I could see the familiar scenery coming into view.

We’re finally safe, I thought, letting out a sigh of relief.

Unlike when we first arrived, we skipped all the medical exams and everything as we left. They ushered us directly into the elevator and sat us down. We weren’t even given time to change clothes.

I sat in the center, flanked by Myusel and Elvia, while Minori-san and Petralka sat across from us.

As the elevator slowly began to move, Myusel’s fingers brushed mine, and she whispered, “It’s all right now, isn’t it?”

“I think so. Even the Americans wouldn’t follow us this far. I mean, if they even knew about this place, probably none of that would have happened to us. If worst came to worst, I guess we could probably jump out of this elevator and fall back to Eldant—I hope.”

I thought I remembered hearing that gravity reversed about halfway through, so that if you didn’t have a rope tied to you, you would slam right into the ground—but it probably wouldn’t kill you. Since you would be back on the magical side of the wormhole, you could soften your landing even more with a burst of wind magic.

“I think we’re safe for real this time,” I said.

“...Yes, sir,” Myusel said, looking truly relieved.

“Thank goodness,” Elvia said, letting the tension flow out of her body. Apparently she hadn’t been any more relaxed than I had this whole time. Seeing the way she flopped back in her chair, I realized how tired she must have been.

There had been moments when I wasn’t sure how things were going to turn out, but here we were, all safe. The feeling filled my heart and mind.

“But...” The gondola picked up speed as it descended. We would hit the gravity switch before long, and then it would be the Eldant side pulling us up. “I guess this means I’m not going back to Japan for a while.”

I was so happy to be able to see my family, and to savor Akihabara for the first time in so long. But if the Americans and the Russians and the Chinese and whoever else were going to be chasing me every time I showed up in Japan, then I wouldn't be able to just bum around and shop. Imagine if I went to Comiket and the Americans showed up and started making trouble. It wasn't likely, but picture the consequences.

"I think I'm all set on Japan for a while," Minori-san said with a dry grin. "I'm not sure I could survive too many more visits like that."

"When you're right, you're right."

"Now that they've missed their chance to get their hands on us, all those other countries will probably pile on the diplomatic pressure trying to find out about our other world, but I guess whatever the government decides to do about that doesn't really matter to us. The point is, by the next time we go home, I'll bet the situation will have changed."

"They should just go ahead and own up to this place."

"The government's put a lot of money into this. They won't want to give it up too easily."

If Japan couldn't make back its investment with the resources, technology, or whatever else it could get from the other world, then it wouldn't be eager to tell everyone else on Earth about it.

"Minori-san, hurry up and make it easier to get back and forth between Japan and Eldant."

"Excuse me, but that's *not* my job."

From beside Minori-san, Petralka said, "We shall certainly go to Ja-pan again!"

"Huh? Uh, Petralka, you're not freaked out or anything?"

She had been one false move away from being killed pretty much that entire time. But she looked more excited than any of us as she answered, "There are so many things we wished to purchase in Akiba, but were unable to. And we were not able to go to Ikebukuro's Otome Road, which we wish to visit!"

She kicked her legs excitedly. I guess she really had a great time in Akihabara. Mmm. How awesome is the enchantment of the otaku Mecca.

"The next occasion ought to be an official visit on which we can meet Ja-pan's king. Ruler to ruler."

"King?"

I guess she meant the emperor. Or maybe she was hoping to meet the person with the most political power? That would be the prime minister. But prime ministers in Japan tended to go down to scandals on a pretty regular basis. What would an absolute ruler like Petralka think about revolving-door leadership like that?

As I was mulling over all this...

"I think we're almost there," Minori-san said. The vibrations in the elevator got smaller, and then it came to a stop.

"I guess we're here."

"Yes, sir," Myusel nodded. As a half-elf, she was affected by the density of a location's magical energy. She had kept several charged magical stones on her person during our trip to Japan, allowing her to feel normal, but it seemed she could still detect the difference with a magic-rich place like Eldant. Could feel it in her bones, if you will.

"We're home...!"

The feeling dawned on me slowly.

It wasn't like we had been in Japan for very long. Just three nights, in fact. And we weren't back at our mansion yet or anything. But still, I felt a sense of relief, like I'd gotten back to the place I really belonged.

Geez... I guess I really had gotten used to life in Eldant. I wasn't sure yet if that was a good thing or not.

"Okay!" Minori-san said, undoing our seatbelts for us. Then she opened the metal doors, and we disembarked from the elevator.

"Ooh..."

Waiting for us outside was a spreading vista of blue sky, full of white clouds, along with a field of grass rustling gently in the breeze. Translucent sprites flitted this way and that around the plain. And—

".....Huh?"

There was something else there too, something that looked distinctly out of place amidst the idyllic scenery. A group of knights, standing with their armor shining and their capes fluttering. Not just a couple, either. I would have guessed at least a hundred. I knew there were several different divisions of knights in Eldant, and it looked like every person in at least one of them had turned up.

What was with the show of strength?!

On top of that, lined up behind the knights, looking like they could send

the entire squadron flying with a flick of their forelegs, sat three gigantic monsters. Long necks, huge wings... Dragons.

I knew, though, that they weren't the real thing. If you looked very closely, you could see seams running along the dragons' "skin," with metal armor just visible beneath.

They were Faldras. False dragons. Man-made monsters created by the dwarves and the elves. They had begun life as nothing more than a prop for our movie, but the dwarves, perfectionists that they were, just kept fiddling with the formula until they had created a full-on, magic-powered transforming robot. There had been some talk of mass-producing them as weapons for the Eldant Empire, and it looked like some of the prototype units had come along to greet us.

And there, right in the middle of the crowd of knights, were three people I recognized.

One of them was a handsome young man wearing a very displeased expression—Petralka's blood relative, captain of the knights, and an important imperial counselor. The noble, Garius en Cordobal.

The second person was an old man with a long beard—Prime Minister Zahar, another top advisor to the empress.

Finally, standing slightly behind these two closest of Petralka's advisors, almost as if she were trying to stay inconspicuous, there was a small dwarf girl. Lauron Selioz. She had recently become Petralka's body double—or more precisely, she controlled the doll that fulfilled that function.

"Your Majesty, how good to see you safe!" Prime Minister Zahar immediately picked Petralka out of the group emerging from the elevator.

"Mm, yes, we have returned," Petralka said, puffing out her small chest importantly before the entourage that had come to greet her.

But...

"Ahem." A second later, she seemed to remember how it was that she had gotten to Japan in the first place. She saw the stone-faced Garius, along with Lauron looking apologetic beside him. Her own expression turned drawn, and she took shelter behind Myusel.

"Uh, um, Your Majesty...?"

"I'm very sorry."

The apology came from Lauron, before Garius could say anything.

Apparently, it hadn't taken long after Petralka left for the body double to

be found out. To be fair, I would have been more surprised if they *hadn't* figured it out. Lauron had Her Majesty's behavior and speech down to a T, but she didn't know anything about the empress's daily duties.

"Your Majesty..." Garius glared at Petralka. Petralka peeked out from behind Myusel, saw the expression on his face, and ducked back behind the maid, trying to make herself even smaller than before. Myusel herself was literally caught in the middle, totally at a loss what to do.

As for me, I looked around at the knights and the Faldras and said, "Er, what's all this...?" Admittedly, I could take a guess.

"We heard there had been some kind of trouble in Ja-pan, and came prepared."

Bingo.

I assumed they had heard something via the JSDF here.

"But it appears you are all in one piece."

"Yeah, somehow."

"We've heard roughly what happened. Shinichi, you did well to bring Her Majesty back safely. You have my thanks."

"Oh, uh, n-no problem." I bowed my head. I had been sure Garius was going to be ticked at me, but I guess he realized that Petralka had stowed away without any encouragement from me.

"As for you, Your Majesty." As he spoke, Garius advanced menacingly.

"Sh—Shinichi!!" Petralka must have decided that Myusel wouldn't be an effective enough shield, because this time she jumped behind me, clinging to the back of my shirt. *Er, uh. That's highly adorable, Your Majesty, and makes me very moe, but I think this is one time I can't help you.*

"Majesty, what were you *thinking*, acting so recklessly?" Garius was just as angry as I had feared. I half expected him to grab Petralka by the scruff of the neck and give her a firm spanking. She might have been the empress, but Garius was her cousin—almost like an older brother to her. At times like this, he was capable of upbraiding her as if he had completely forgotten the difference in their stations.

"W-We wished to see Ja-pan for ourselves! We had no choice!"

"How did you not have a choice?!"

"We were careful to leave things in Lauron's hands!"

Uh, I'm not sure you could call that being careful. (I thought, but didn't

say.)

It wasn't hard to imagine Lauron, suddenly charged with being the empress, in a very tight spot. I felt bad for her. It was impossible, and she would have known it was wrong, but she could hardly refuse a direct order from Her Majesty.

"And we also made certain to bring everyone souvenirs! For you in particular, Garius—for you, we have these BL books we bought in Akiba..."

"...Majesty!"

For an instant, Garius's eyes had been drawn to the manga Petralka produced from her bag—I thought. I was probably imagining it.

At length, overwhelmed by the force of Garius's glare, Petralka's head drooped and she said, "...We are sorry."

"Your Majesty, your person is the very embodiment of this empire. Please don't put yourself in unnecessary danger," Garius said. "Elder Zahar and myself lost years of our lives worrying."

"Erk....." Petralka gulped as she realized how real Garius's concern for her was.

For quite a while after that, Petralka could only stand there with her shoulders slumped while Garius continued to lecture her like a mother hen.

So, it had been a few days since we got back to Eldant. Matoba-san let us know that the American army had entirely withdrawn, and Reito-san and the other agents were safe. The two governments quietly decided to pretend nothing had happened.

I didn't know what would come next, but it looked like, just as Minori-san had said, America and any other countries that wanted to know what Japan was up to would have to find a more discreet way of figuring it out.

Ayasaki Hikaru-san, whom I had trusted to run Amutech while I was gone, reported that nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Other than, I suppose, the tizzy into which Garius and Prime Minister Zahar had fallen when they realized Petralka had snuck away with me.

On that note...

I heard that the empress, after her little adventure and her thorough scolding from Garius, was not allowed to leave the castle for a while. I felt kind of bad for her, but, well, I figured she could amuse herself with the souvenirs she'd brought back from Japan. She especially seemed to like that *Gaishi* Foreman.

Elvia was absorbed in drawing, the art books she'd gotten in Akihabara close at hand. Minori-san continued to watch out for me, doing her daily military training as usual. Myusel went back to being a maid. And me, I returned to my job as Amutech's general manager.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is, daily life in the Eldant Empire went back to normal for us pretty quickly. Even if I was a little surprised to discover that, for better or for worse, daily life in Japan wasn't what I thought of when I thought "normal" anymore.

Then one day...

"Hmmm..."

I was fiddling with my phone in my room at our mansion. I opened the photos folder to find a whole slew of pictures I'd taken in Japan.

Actually, a lot of them were shots of the newest arrivals that I'd taken at the various bookstores, DVD places, and game shops we visited in Akihabara. With Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia along, it had been impossible

to really take a close look at what was new and hot, so instead I snapped pictures with the intent of "shopping" later—by which I mean adding them to the list of "pilot products" to import to Eldant.

I slid my finger along the screen, *scroll, scroll*.

After a while, the photos changed to pictures of people instead of products: my dad. My mom. Shizuki. Elvia. Minori-san. Petralka... and Myusel.

I was sitting there, just gazing at pictures of Myusel smiling here, there, and everywhere in Akihabara, when a knock came at the door.

"Oh, uh, come in," I said. I found my heart pounding for some reason.

Just as I suspected, it was Myusel. "Master, I've brought tea." She was wearing her usual maid outfit, and came into the room with a cart of tea and sweets. As she set about making the tea, just like she always did, I found myself gazing at her the same way I had been at my phone, which was still in my hand.

"U-Um, Shinichi-sama? Is something wrong...?"

"Oh, no! Nahh!" The Myusel on my phone was wearing trendy Japanese clothing. The one in front of me was dressed in a maid uniform. My eyes wandered back and forth between the two of them... "I was just thinking, the clothes you wore in Japan looked good on you, but this maid outfit is more like, you know, *you*."

"Is... Is that so?" I didn't know why, but she blushed a little. The way she glanced at the floor, slightly shy, was (as one might expect) exceedingly cute.

Afraid that the sheer moe-ness of it would completely overwhelm me, I deliberately changed the subject. "Say, uh, Myusel?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Back in Japan... I mean, a lot happened, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Petralka, she was saying she wanted to go back, but, uh, Myusel, do you—"

I wondered if *she* wanted to go back to Japan, too. Maybe our experiences had left her hating Japan—or should I say, the world on the other side of the hyperspace wormhole. The thought had been bothering me ever since we got back.

Myusel just blinked, not saying anything. The expression on her face

suggested she hadn’t been expecting this particular question.

Then, suddenly, she broke into a smile and said, “Me? It doesn’t matter where I am, Shinichi-sama, as long as I’m by your side.”

“Huh...?” Now it was my turn to blink.

Whoa, wait. Is she saying...?

“...Oh, uh, really? You really think so?”

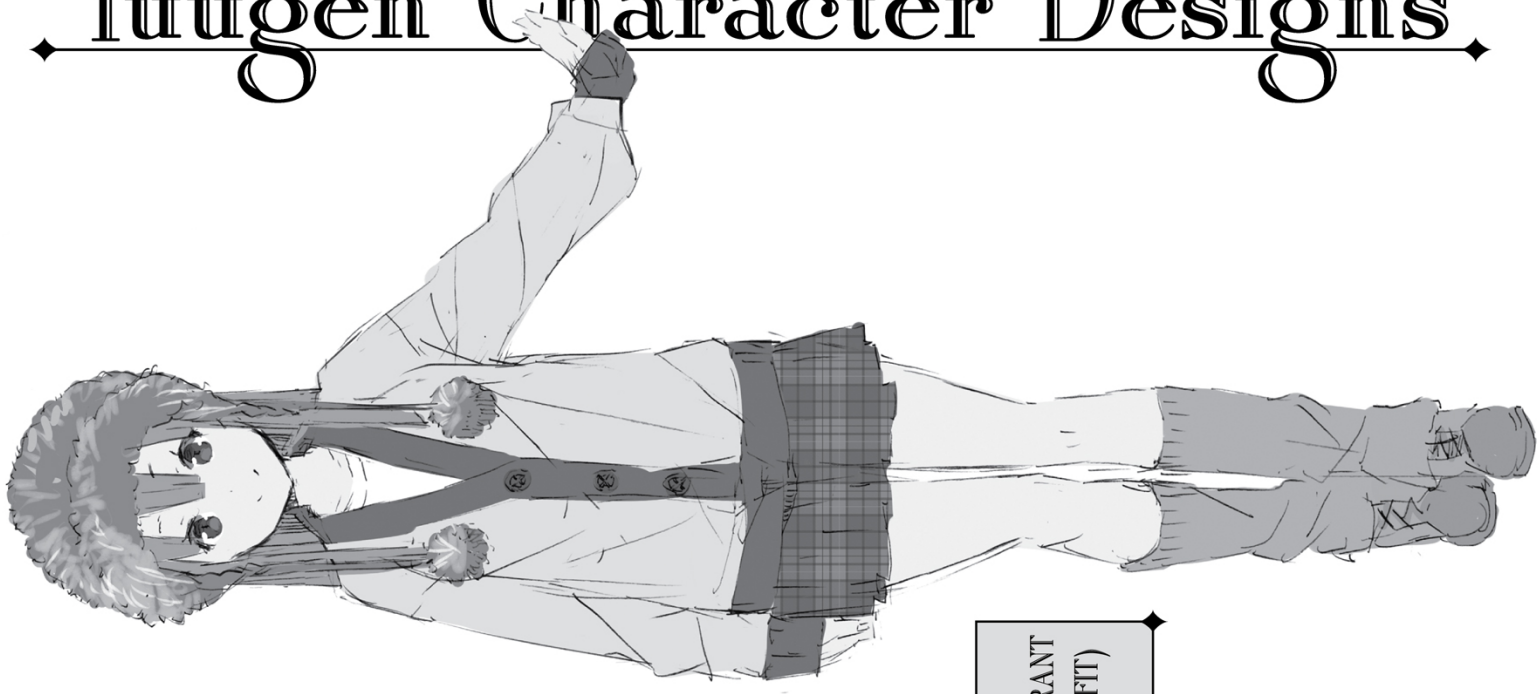
“Yes!”

She grinned from ear to ear, cuter than ever. But I purposely decided not to take a picture. Instead, I focused on Myusel, taking in every detail of this moment, so I would never forget it.

□□□□□

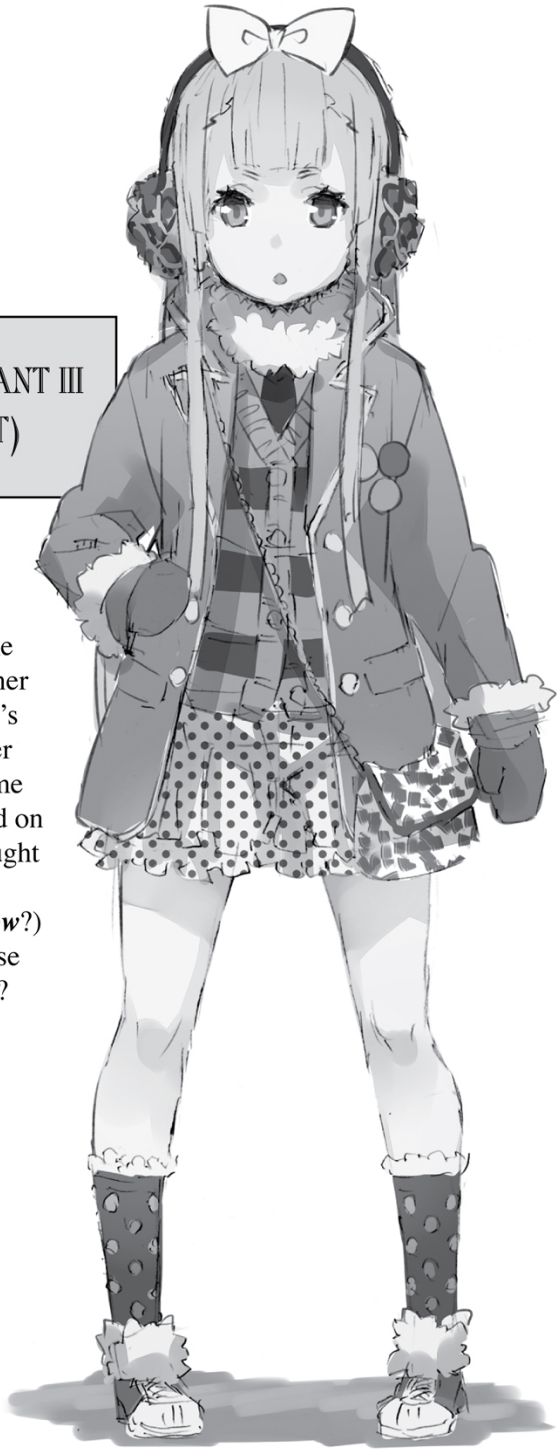
To be Continued...

Yuugen Character Designs



MYUSEL FOURANT
(JAPAN OUTFIT)

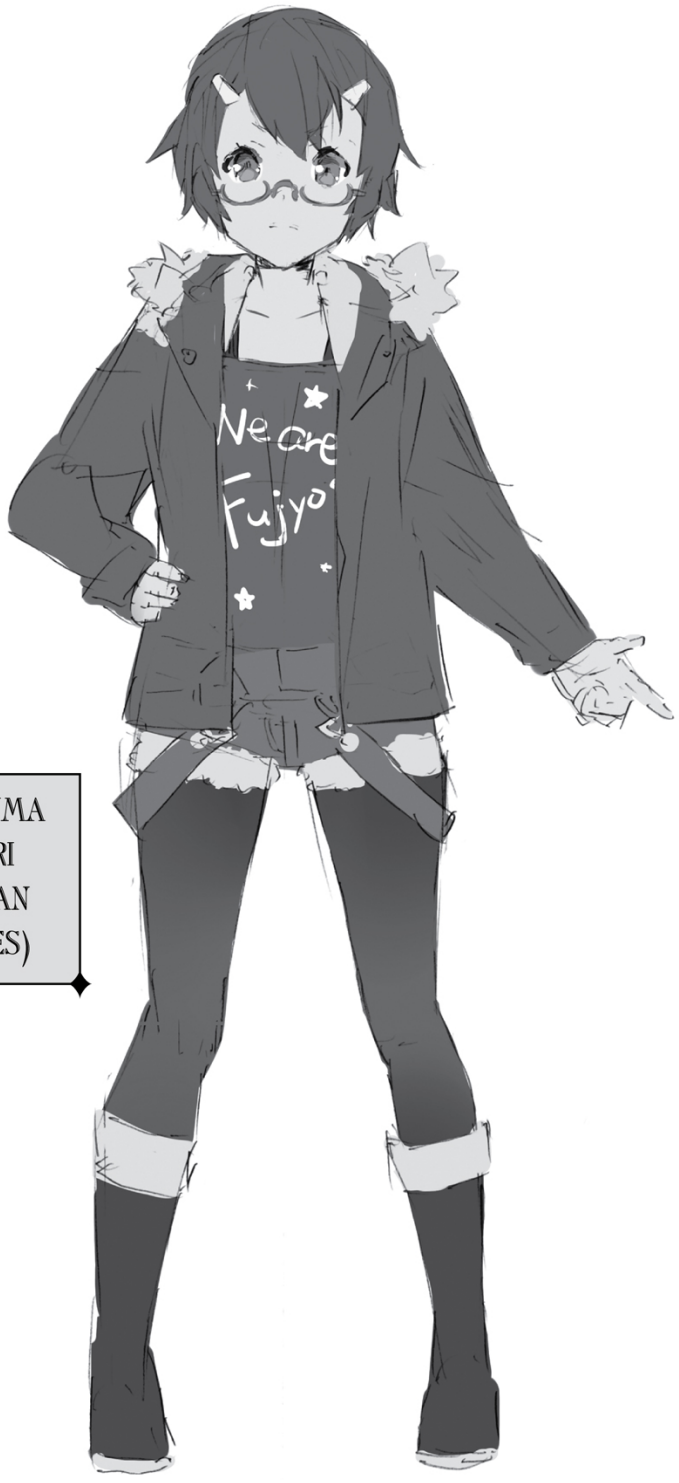
PETRALKA AN ELDANT III (JAPAN OUTFIT)



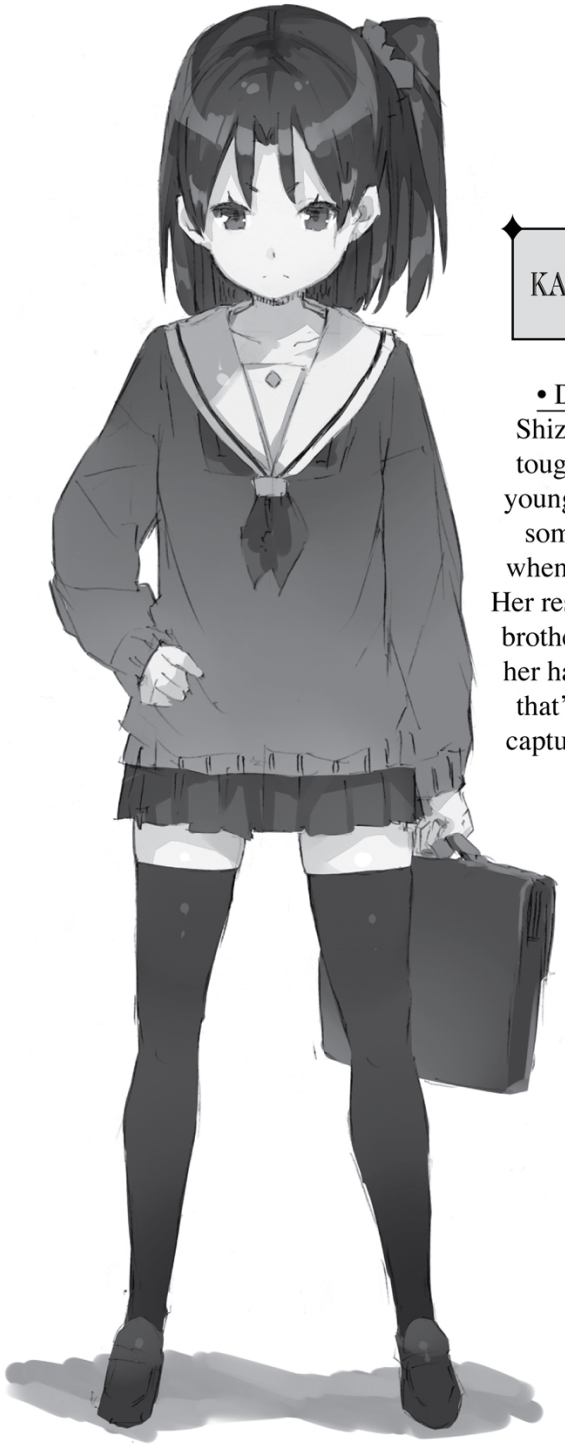
• Design Notes •

It's Petralka's first time in Japan—and outside her own country—and she's excited. She's done her best to put together some Japan-style fashion based on the stuff that's been brought to Eldant (especially ***Strawberry Mar**mallow***?) Could this be a Japanese subculture all its own? (Nope. Pure fantasy.)

ELVIA HARNEIMAN
(JAPAN OUTFIT)



KOGANUMA MINORI (CIVILIAN CLOTHES)



KANOU SHIZUKI

• Design Notes •

Shizuki tries to look tough, but she's still young enough to want someone to turn to when she needs them. Her respect for her older brother runs just under her harsh exterior, and that's what I tried to capture in this design.

Afterword

Hullo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 10 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

How about that? *Outbreak Company* has hit the double digits! Obviously I've needed a lot of help to produce the limited-edition Volume 9 with drama CD, the anime and manga versions—the whole media mix thing—but just the fact that I've made it to ten volumes is a testament to the support of my readers, and for that I'm extremely grateful.

Now then, Volume 10 is the second part of the story that started in Volume 9. I deliberately left a few loose ends at the conclusion of this volume, though. I don't know exactly which ones I'll have the opportunity to pursue, but there's some foreshadowing for later books and even the final volume... but you can just kindly ignore all that for now.

Anyway.

The afterword below includes some minor spoilers, so if you haven't read the book yet, I suggest doing so first.

Now, about the Homecoming Arc, or Japan Arc, or whatever you want to call it.

Shinichi's dad is pretty transparently me—that is to say, he's very Sakaki Ichiro-ish (both the way he acts and the way he's drawn, heh!). Making him a light-novel author was just an easy-to-use plot detail; I don't mean to imply that Shinichi, his little sister Shizuki, or his mom are anything like my real family—just so we're clear (lol). My lovely bride isn't a bishoujo-game designer and doesn't possess mad hacking skills.

And I don't play *KanColle* (lol).

Besides, my kids are actually an older sister and a younger brother, so Shinichi would have to have a big sister who's about college age... I have to admit, picturing how that character would look in the illustrations is a lot of fun.

Eh, it'd be too easy for her character to overlap with Minori-san's if I wasn't careful.

As for Shizuki, the tsundere younger sister, I was surprised to realize how rarely I had written a character who relates to the protagonist in that way, so it was kind of refreshing. Petralka herself, and a number of my other female characters, might seem to fill the role of a strong but somewhat shy heroine, but all of them have gone fairly easy on the *tsun* (prickliness). They might have a sharp word for the hero, but they rarely outright make fun of or attack him. In fact, they tend to acknowledge and demonstrate their affection for him pretty quickly.

For that reason, as well as simply to help differentiate her, I tried to write Shizuki as more of an orthodox tsundere. So, readers: how did I do? Personally, Yuugen-shi's design turned out younger than I had been picturing, which give a little something extra to that orthodoxy (she's grown meaner to her brother the older she gets, but she's not always completely comfortable with that side of herself), I thought.

Also, Elvia's whole "I-wanna-see-fairies" shtick at the end was dreamed up by a particular member of my assistant staff so rotten she's practically fermenting. At first, I (and my editor) had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, and thinking it felt a little weird to call my assistant purely to ask about it, we decided to look it up on the web. And, uh... wow. I guess the world is always a bigger place than you thought.

I see... So that's one of the meanings of *fairy*. Huh.

I'm still mulling over some things as regards volumes 11 onwards. I wonder how they'll turn out. I'm thinking it's about time for an Elvia-centric story (or more precisely, an Amatena- and Clara-centric one), but we haven't seen Loek and Romilda in a while, either. Actually, there's lots of side characters that I'd like to shine the spotlight on. An author's life is never easy.

Maybe it's about time for another short-story collection?

In any event, that's Volume 10. *Outbreak Company* now occupies close to 4,000 sheets of manuscript paper. We're approaching epic status here. Will it hit 10,000 sheets before it's over? Or will it putter out at just 5,000? Only time will tell, but I hope you, dear reader, will stay with me till the end.

12 May 2014

Sakaki Ichiro

Bonus Translator’s Notes

Chapter One

Sambo
A Soviet martial art.

"The *Scare* in Red Scare"
The Japanese describes this "Putin" as "the image of *oso-roshia* (□□□□□)." This is a really, truly terrible pun on *osoroshii* (scary) + *roshia* (Russia). It has fairly wide currency on the Japanese internet as a way of referring to any of the less savory practices of the Russian state.

The Boloi Circus**
That is, the Bolshoi Circus, an auditorium and performance venue in Moscow.

Cat & Bunny
A play on *Tiger & Bunny*.

Nooooeeees!
Jp. *rame*. This is a corruption of *dame* (no!/don't!), made prominent by the series *Doruaga no Tou* (*Tower of Druaga*).

A Different Direction
Shinichi says that there were eight attackers, and that "each of them came from a different direction." This implies one from each of the cardinal directions (North, South, etc.) and one from each of the ordinal directions (northeast, southwest, etc.). "The eight directions" (*happou*) is also a common expression in both Japanese and Chinese meaning "everywhere at once."

Type 64 Silenced Pistols
The Type 64 is a semiautomatic pistol formerly used by the People's Liberation Army.

Consumption Tax

A consumption tax (*shouhizei*) is assessed on most goods sold in Japan. The rate of this tax has been raised a number of times, but Shinichi's dad is probably referring to the increase to 8% in 2014.

Assemblyperson

A *giin* or member of a prefectural assembly (*gikai* or *ken-gikai*), which are the legislative bodies of Japan's individual prefectures.

110

The number for emergency services in Japan, equivalent to 911 in the US. It's often referred to as "*hyaku-tou-ban*," combining the number 110 (using an alternate reading of the number ten) with the suffix *-ban*, or "number."

Without Even Taking Off Their Shoes

In Japan, you are expected to remove your shoes almost any time you enter a private residence (or for that matter, even a school). To fail to do so —and therefore to track dirt and filth from outside into the home—is considered tremendously rude.

Heavily Accented Japanese

In the original, this is indicated by using kanji where they would be expected, but then rendering the rest of the sentence in katakana. (For example, □□□□□□□! [*ware-ware TO tomo NI koI!*, "Come with us!") This makes the sentence somewhat more readable, and therefore seem less "stumbling," than the all-katakana lines of the Eldant characters.

Spread the Word

The Japanese is *kakusan kibou*, literally "share wish," that is, "I hope you'll share this." "Plz share" might be another viable translation, but wouldn't have had the gravity that was necessary for this line in this scene.

LINE

An instant-communication app that launched in Japan in 2012.

Ni Nama**

Nico Nama, Nico Nico’s live-video streaming site.

Chapter Two

Airsoft

A team shooting game similar to paintball, where teams of players hold battles using replica weaponry. Unlike paintball, though, airsoft pellets don't mark their targets. Airsoft originated in Japan, although now it's known around the world.

Nasty Otaku

Jp. *kimo-ota*, a contraction of *kimoi otaku*. *Kimoi* (itself perhaps related to *kimochi warui*, "sickening") means disgusting, the sort of thing that makes you sick to your stomach.

Egao Video

Egao means "smiling face," and is a clear play on *niko-niko video*, the Japanese streaming site. (*Niko-niko*, or in the site's spelling, Nico Nico, is roughly "grin.")

Thinking the Exact Same Thing

In the Japanese, Shinichi says he and Myusel shared *aun no kokyuu*. *Kokyuu* means "breath." *Aun* (or *a-un*) refers to the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. In many Japanese temples, a pair of imposing statues can be seen, one with its mouth open to represent the sound *a*, the other with its mouth closed, making the sound *un*. Between them, they represent the beginning and end of all things. The two are considered to be in perfect harmony, and therefore the expression *aun no kokyuu* ("[sharing] an *a-un* breath") means to be of one mind.

Sneak Tourism

Jp. *O-shinobi kankou*, "sightseeing on the sly." This must be used by people who have spotted Shinichi and the gang out and about but trying to be inconspicuous.

A Certain Anime Event

Shinichi may be referring to Summer Comiket, or just perhaps to the

now defunct Tokyo Anime Fair, though that was mostly held in February or March.

Intercom

An intercom providing audio and often video from a buzzer at the front door is a feature of many Japanese residential homes.

A Supra, a Skyline, or a Fairlady Z

That is, a Toyota Supra, Nissan Skyline, or Nissan Fairlady Z, all well-known Japanese sports cars.

Systema

Another Russian martial arts system. There are actually a couple of characters in popular fighting games that allegedly use Systema, but the games (including *Street Fighter V* and *Dead or Alive 6*) are too recent to be specifically referenced here.

"More Subdued Arts"

Judo and aikido (a martial art similar to judo but with less emphasis on competition) are widely perceived as being "gentle" arts; they're often associated more with joint locks and control holds than with direct physical strikes. Karate and to an extent kenpo (a somewhat broad term) are associated with punching, board-breaking, and "karate yells" (*kiai*). Police forces in Japan frequently learn "softer" martial arts so that they can respond to and control situations and suspects. It would be a mistake, however, to think of these arts as harmless; they have punches, kicks, and other physical strikes like any other martial art, and both are known for their devastating throws, such as the one Reito performs on the Russian agent.

Reito's Gun

Japanese gun laws are exceedingly strict, generally allowing only law enforcement officers and a small handful of game hunters to possess firearms. The only other people who carry guns are gangsters. Reito obviously doesn't spend most of his time in the mountains stalking wild boar, so his having a gun marks him out as either a constable or a criminal.

Special Security Team
A counterterrorism arm of the Japanese Coast Guard.

Tracing the Character for Person on One's Palm
The character for person (*hito*) is □, two simple strokes, making it easy to trace quickly and repeatedly. This helps provide a distraction and calm anxiety.

Chapter Three

The Going Is Easy, but the Coming Home...

The title of chapter three alludes to an Edo-era children's song which includes the line "*Iki wa yoi yoi, kaeri wa kowai*" (the going is easy, but the coming home a fright). The tune (the song is known as "*Touryanse*," or "Come On In") is—or used to be—commonly played at street crossings in Japan when it is safe to cross, and as such is probably familiar to most anime fans who have seen any series with a contemporary urban setting, even if they don't know what it's called.

Specialty Shops

As Petralka discovers, because *gacha* are dispensed at random, it can take a fair amount of time (and money) to get a specific figure you want. For this reason, some shops purchase the figures from the gacha machines themselves, so customers can pick the figures they're after and purchase them individually.

Otome Road

An "otaku street" in Tokyo's Ikebukuro district that appeals especially to women. (And *especially* to fujoshi.)

Tourist Sites

In thinking about where Elvia might want to go, Shinichi ticks off a whole list of otaku-oriented attractions in the Tokyo area. A giant Gundam statue has stood in the Odaiba area since 2009 (originally erected to celebrate Gundam's 30th anniversary); in 2017 the original statue was replaced by one from *Gundam Unicorn*. Comiket (short for "Comics Market") is a semi-annual convention focusing especially on doujinshi, while Nakano Broadway (so called because it's a large thoroughfare-cum-shopping district in the Nakano area of Tokyo) is another shopping area with lots of stores selling anime-related goods.

A couple paragraphs later, he goes on: "Rat Kingdom" (*Nezumi no Oukoku*) is an attraction in Urayasu City in Chiba Prefecture, next door to Tokyo. The Ghibli Museum is located in Mitaka, on the western edge of

Tokyo's metropolitan sprawl. It's not far from Kichijouji, the "trendy" district Shinichi mentions. Kichijouji has a lot of green space in the form of Inokashira Park (which includes a zoo), as well as shopping and eating opportunities.

Aniki

This is a reference to Billy Herrington, a gay porn star who became an internet meme in Japan. In his popularity, many mashups of clips from his videos were made. (The mashups are known as *gachimuchi*, which Shinichi uses in this sentence and which we translated simply as "mashups." Literally, though, it's derived from gay slang referring to someone with a muscly but sexy body, like a wrestler.) Herrington became known as Aniki ("Big Bro") on the Japanese web. Many of these mashups play on deliberate mishearings (in Japanese, *soramimi*) of lines from his films; *soramimi* is what Shinichi accuses Elvia of when he exclaims "You misheard!" Herrington sadly died in a car accident in 2018, at the age of just forty-eight.

M4A1 Carbine

A gun similar to an assault rifle currently favored by the US armed forces for a wide variety of applications, largely replacing the familiar M16.

Aggregator Blog

In Japanese, *matome burogu* (or *saito*, site). These are websites that collect information or links about a specific topic. Sometimes also called "curator sites."

CH-53D Sea Stallion

As Shinichi explains, the Sea Stallion is a heavy transport helicopter used chiefly to ferry troops from one place to another. The crash he mentions is probably one that occurred on 13 August 2004: a CH-53D belonging to the US Marines at Futenma Air Station crashed into Okinawa International University. The crash didn't cause significant injury or damage, but it did exacerbate tensions with residents of Futenma, where the airbase is not very popular. Other incidents in the years since this book was published have continued to make the base a point of contention and have

fueled calls for its closure, although as of this writing it is still open.

Hayate

The term Hayate can refer to a few different military vehicles, but the one Shinichi seems to have in mind is the so-called *koukidousha*, or High Mobility Vehicle (HMV). It's a JSDF personnel carrier that looks a bit like a beefy Jeep. Its nickname, Hayate, literally means "[a] swift wind."

Afterword

KanColle

Short for *Kantai Korekushon* (Fleet Collection), a browser game that features classic Japanese battleships personified as young girls.

Manuscript Paper

Called *genkou youshi* in Japanese, this is a type of paper printed with a grid of either 200 or 400 squares, each intended to accommodate a single Japanese character (kanji or kana) or punctuation mark. *Genkou youshi* is ubiquitous in Japanese life, being used, for example, to do school assignments, so any Japanese adults would have a sense of how much text is represented by a certain number of pages of manuscript paper.

Yuugen Character Designs

Strawberry Mar**mallow

Refers to *Strawberry Marshmallow* (*Ichigo Mashimaro*), a manga that started in 2002 (there was an anime in 2005). Petralka's outfit in this volume resembles the clothing worn by the characters in this series.

ガ
ガ
ドドド
ドドド
ガン
ガン
ガン
ア
ア
ア
ア
ア
ボン

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter One: This Just In: We're Under Attack!

Chapter Two: Operation Rescue Minori-san

Chapter Three: The Going Is Easy, but the Coming Home...

Yuugen Character Designs

Afterword
Bonus Translator's Notes
Bonus Textless Illustrations
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 11 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Outbreak Company: Volume 10
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2014 Ichiro Sakaki
Illustrations by Yuugen

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2014 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.
Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: August 2019